SWEET
TEMPTATION
She was wicked lovely and far too young.
Cora Reilly

SWEET TEMPTATION

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The first time Cassio meets his fiancée, she calls him “sir.”

After losing his wife, Cassio is left to take care of two small children while trying to establish his rule over Philadelphia. Now he needs a mother for his children and someone who can warm his bed at night.

But in a world as traditional as his, choosing your wife is duty, not pleasure.

Rules have to be followed, traditions heeded.

That’s how he ends up with a woman—a girl—barely of age. She may not be what he and his children need, but she’s lovely and a sweet temptation he can’t resist.

Giulia has always known she’ll marry the man her father chooses for her, but she never expects to be given to someone so much older. Suddenly she’s supposed to be a mother to two small children when she hasn’t even held a baby before.

Giulia quickly realizes that Cassio isn’t interested in a relationship on equal footing. Her mother has warned her that men of power, like Cassio, don’t tolerate insolence. Tired of being treated as a nanny and clueless child-bride, Giulia decides to fight for her version of a happy family.

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PROLOGUE

Cassio

I stared down at my blood-covered hands and then at the lifeless body of my wife. Slowly, I closed the door in case Daniele came by. He didn't need to see more of this. The red roses the maid had bought for Gaia as a gift for our eighth anniversary lay crumpled beside the limp body. Red roses to match the blood that stained the sheets and her white dress.

Picking up my phone, I called Father. "Cassio, don't you have a dinner reservation with Gaia?"

"Gaia is dead."

Silence. "Can you repeat that?"

"Gaia is dead."

"Cassio—"

"Someone needs to clean this up before the kids see it. Send a clean-up crew and inform Luca."

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ONE

Cassio

When your wife died, sadness and despair were the expected emotions, but I felt only anger and resentment as I watched the coffin being lowered into her grave.

Gaia and I had been married for eight years. On the day of our anniversary, death ended our marriage. A fitting end to a bond that had been doomed from the very start. Maybe it was fate that today was the hottest day of the summer. Sweat trickled down my forehead and temple, but the tears wouldn't join in.

Father tightened his grip on my shoulder. Was it to steady himself or me? His skin had been pale since his third heart attack, and Gaia's death didn't help matters. He met my gaze, worried. Cataracts clouded his eyes. Each day that passed had him fading away even more. The weaker he got, the stronger I needed to be. If you appeared vulnerable, the mafia would eat you whole.

I gave him a small nod then turned back to the grave, my expression steel.

Every Underboss of the Famiglia was in attendance. Even Luca Vitiello, our Capo, had come from New York with his wife. They all wore their solemn faces—perfect masks, just like mine. They'd soon give me their condolences, whispering fake words of reassurance, when rumors about my wife's early death were already making the rounds.

I was glad that neither Daniele nor Simona were old enough to understand what was being said. They didn't realize their mother was dead. Even Daniele, at two years old, couldn't grasp the finality of the word "dead." And Simona… left without a mother at only four months old.

A new wave of fury raced through my body, but I shoved it down. Few of the men around me were friends; most of them were looking for a sign of weakness. I was a young Underboss, too young in many eyes, but Luca trusted me to rule over Philadelphia with an iron fist. I wouldn't fail him or my father.

After the funeral, we gathered in my mansion for lunch. Sybil, my maid, handed Simona to me. My baby girl had cried all night, but now slept soundly in my arms. Daniele clung to my leg, looking confused. It was the first time he'd sought my closeness since Gaia's death. I could feel all the compassionate looks. Alone with two small kids, a young Underboss… they were looking for any small crack in my façade.

Mother came over with a sad smile and took Simona from me. She'd offered to take care of my children, but she was sixty-four and had my father to take care of. My sisters gathered around us, cooing at Daniele. Mia picked him up and pressed him to her chest. My sisters, too, had offered their help, but each of them had their own small children to take care of, and they didn't live close by—except for Mia.

"You look tired, son," Father said quietly.

"I didn't get much sleep these last few nights." Since their mother's death, neither Daniele nor Simona had slept more than two hours at a time. The image of Gaia's bloody dress crossed my mind, but I shoved it away.

"You need to look for a mother for your children," Father said, leaning heavily on his walking stick.

"Mansueto!" Mother exclaimed under her breath. "We buried Gaia today."

Father patted her arm but looked at me. He knew I didn't need time to mourn Gaia, but we needed to keep decorum in mind. Not to mention that I wasn't sure I wanted another woman in my life. What I wanted was irrelevant, though. Every aspect of my life was dictated by ironclad rules and traditions.

"The children need a mother, and you need someone who'll take care of you," Father said.

“Gaia never took care of him,” Mia muttered. She, too, hadn’t forgiven my late wife.

“Not here, not today,” I clipped. She snapped her mouth shut.

“I suppose you already have someone in mind for Cassio,” my eldest sister Ilaria told Father with a roll of her eyes.

“Every Captain and Underboss with a daughter of marrying age will already have contacted Dad,” Mia said quietly.

Father hadn’t talked to me about it yet, because he knew I wouldn’t have listened. However, Mia was likely right. I was a hot commodity—the only unmarried Underboss in the Famiglia.

Luca and his wife Aria came over. I gave my family a sign to be silent. Luca shook my hand again, and Aria smiled at my children. “If you need to step back from your duties for a while, let me know,” Luca said.

“No,” I said immediately. If I gave up my position now, I’d never get it back. Philadelphia was my city, and I would rule over it.

Luca inclined his head. “I know it’s not a good day to discuss matters, but my uncle Felix approached me.”

Father nodded, as if he knew what Luca was going to say. “It’s a reasonable idea.”

I motioned for them to follow me outside into the garden. “What is it?”

“If I didn’t know of the circumstances of your wife’s death, I wouldn’t have broached the subject today. It’s disrespectful.” Luca only knew what I’d *told* him.

Father shook his head. “We can’t wait the expected year. My grandchildren need a mother.”

“What is it you have to discuss?” I asked Luca, tired of my father and him knowing what was going on and leaving me in the dark.

“My uncle Felix has a daughter who isn’t promised. She could become your wife. A union between Philadelphia and Baltimore would solidify your power, Cassio,” Luca said.

Felix Rizzo ruled as Underboss over Baltimore. He’d gained the position by marrying one of Luca’s aunts—not because he was good at the job—but he was a tolerable man. I didn’t remember his daughter.

“Why isn’t she married yet?” As the daughter of a high-ranking Made Man, she would have been promised to someone in the Famiglia for years… unless something was wrong with her.

Luca and Father exchanged a look which raised my alarms. “She was promised to the son of a Captain, but he got killed during a Bratva attack last year.”

Quickly recognizing my troubled expression, Father added, “She didn’t know him. She only met him once when she was twelve.”

There was more.

“You could marry her in early November. That way the wedding wouldn’t be too close to Gaia’s funeral.”

“Why November?”

“That’s when she turns eighteen,” Luca said.

I stared at him and my father. Had they lost their minds? “The girl is almost fourteen years younger than me!”

“Given your circumstances, she’s the best option, Cassio,” Father said imploringly. “All the other available daughters of high-ranking Made Men are even younger, and I doubt you’d be willing to marry a widow, given your past experiences.”

My expression became hard. “Today isn’t the right time to discuss this.”

Luca inclined his head. “Don’t wait too long. Felix wants to find a match for Giulia as quickly as possible.”

I gave a terse nod then returned inside. Mother was trying to calm Simona who’d started crying, and Mia was on her way out of the living room with Daniele in mid-tantrum. I needed a wife. However, today I didn’t have the mental capability to make that kind of decision.

Faro handed me a martini before he sank down in the armchair across from mine in my office. “You look like shit, Cassio.”

I gave him a tight smile. “Another sleepless night.”

Taking a sip from his drink, he gave me a disapproving look. “Say yes to Rizzo. You need a wife. You could have one in less than four months. He desperately wants you in his family, saving his sorry ass, or else he wouldn’t have waited all these weeks for you to make up your mind. I’m sure he could have found another husband for his daughter by now.”

I drank half of my martini in one sip. “Almost fourteen years between us. You realize I’ll be waiting for that girl to turn eighteen.”

“Then you’ll have to marry a widow. Do you really want a woman who’s hung up on another man after the thing with Gaia?” he asked quietly.

I grimaced. Most of these days I tried to forget Gaia, and even Daniele had stopped asking for his mother, realizing she wouldn’t be coming back. He’d become awfully quiet ever since, never saying a single word.

“No,” I said harshly. “No widow.” Not only did I not want to risk a repeat performance, but all the widows on the market had kids and I didn’t want my children to have to share her attention. They needed all the care and love they could get. They were suffering, and no matter how much I tried, I wasn’t the person who could give them what they needed.

“For Heaven’s sake, call Rizzo. What’s the problem? The girl will be of age soon.”

I gave him a look.

“Other men would kill for a chance to have a sexy young girl in their bed once more, yet you play woe-is-me when one is offered to you on a silver platter.”

“If we weren’t childhood friends, I would have relieved you of one of your fingers for that tone,” I said.

“Good thing we’re friends, then,” Faro said, raising his glass.

After yet another night full of screaming, I called Felix in the morning.

“Hello, Felix. It’s Cassio.”

“Cassio, what a pleasure. I assume you’ve come to a decision regarding a bond with my daughter?”

“I’d like to marry her.” That wasn’t exactly the truth. She was the only option to save my sanity. “I can’t wait long. You know I have two small children who need a mother.”

“Of course. Giulia is very caring. We could set up the wedding for early November, a day after Giulia’s eighteenth birthday?”

I gritted my teeth. “All right. That’s reasonable.”

“I’d like you to meet her before so we can discuss the details for the feast. It’ll be a lot of work to set up a grand wedding on such short notice.”

“You insist on a big celebration?”

“Yes. Giulia is our only daughter, and my wife wants to organize something special for her. With our son, she couldn’t really plan as much as she wanted. Not to mention considering our status, it’ll be an important social gathering, Cassio.”

“I can’t be involved in the planning. I have enough on my plate as it is, so your wife would have to do everything.”

“That won’t be a problem. Let’s discuss the details when you come over, shall we? When can you make it?”

Sybil planned to spend the weekend at my house to keep an eye on the kids. “In two days, but I can’t stay long.”

“Perfect. You made the right decision, Cassio. Giulia is wonderful.”

Dad was acting strange during dinner. He kept staring at me as if he was on the verge of saying something but never did. Mom looked like she’d gotten an invitation to an exclusive Chanel summer sale.

When I was done with dinner, I waited for Dad to excuse me. I wanted to finish the painting I began this morning. Now that I was finished with high school, I’d been using my free time to improve my painting skills.

He cleared his throat. “We need to talk to you.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. The last time Dad began a conversation like that, he’d told me that my fiancé had been killed during a Bratva attack. It hadn’t hit me like it should have, considering our planned future, but I’d only met him once and that had been many years ago. Mom had been the only one

who’d cried bitter tears, mainly because his death meant I was left without a fiancé at seventeen. That was a scandal in the making.

“We’ve found you a new husband.”

“Oh,” I said. It wasn’t that I hadn’t expected to be married off soon, but given my age, I was hoping they would have involved me in the process of finding my future husband.

“He’s Underboss!” It burst out of Mom as she beamed at me.

My eyebrows rose. No wonder she was enthusiastic. My late fiancé had only been the son of a Captain, nothing to get too excited about—in Mom’s opinion.

I wracked my brain for an Underboss close to my age, but came up empty-handed. “Who is he?”

Dad avoided my eyes. “Cassio Moretti.”

My mouth dropped open. Dad often talked to me about business if he needed to vent because Mom wasn’t interested in the details. The name Moretti had been making the rounds for months now. The cruelest Underboss of the Famiglia had lost his wife and was now left to raise his two little kids alone. Speculations on how and why his wife had died were rampant, but only the Capo knew the details. Some said Moretti had killed his wife in a rage, while others said she’d become sick living under his strict rule. There were even people that speculated she’d killed herself to escape his cruelty. Neither rumor made me want to meet the man, much less marry him.

“He’s much older than me,” I said eventually.

“Thirteen years, Giulia. He’s a man in his prime,” Mom admonished.

“Why does he want me?” I hadn’t even met him. He didn’t know me. And what was worse: I had no clue how to raise kids.

“You are a Rizzo. The joining of two important families is always desirable,” Mom said.

I looked at Dad, but he was staring at his wine glass. The last thing he’d said to me about Cassio Moretti was that Luca made him Underboss because the two of them were alike—both irrevocably cruel, pitiless, and built like bulls.

And now he was giving me to a man like that.

“When?” I asked. Given Mom’s excitement, all the details must have already been decided.

“One day after your birthday,” Mom said.

“I’m surprised you waited for me to become of age. It’s not like we’re a law-abiding society in general.”

Mom pursed her lips. “I hope you get rid of that snappiness before you meet Cassio. A man like him won’t tolerate your insolence.”

My hands curled into fists under the table. Mom was likely the driving force behind the marriage. She was always trying to better our position in the Famiglia.

She smiled then stood. “I better start looking for a location. This will be the event of the year.”

She patted my cheek like I was a cute little poodle who’d won her a trophy in a dog show. Noticing my sour expression, she frowned. “I’m not sure Cassio will approve of your sullenness… or your bangs.”

“She looks fine, Egidia,” Dad said firmly.

“She looks pretty and young, not sophisticated and ladylike.”

“If Cassio wants a lady, he should stop robbing cradles,” I muttered.

Mom gasped, clapping a hand over her heart like I would single-handedly put her into an early grave. Dad tried to mask a laugh by coughing.

Mom wasn’t fooled. She pointed a warning finger at him. “Talk some sense into your daughter. You know Cassio. I always told you to be stricter with her.” She turned and left with a swoosh of her long skirt.

Dad sighed. He gave me a tired smile. “Your mother only wants what’s best for you.”

“She wants what’s best for our standing. How’s marrying a cruel old man good for me, Dad?”

“Come on,” Dad said, standing. “Let’s take a walk in the garden.”

I followed him. He held out his arm, and I took it. The air was warm and humid and hit me like a wrecking ball. “Cassio isn’t that old, Giulia. Only thirty-one.”

I tried to think of men his age, but I never really paid attention to men. Wasn’t Luca around his age? Thinking of my cousin wasn’t a consolation; he scared me senseless. If Cassio was like that…

What if he was a disgusting fat brute? I looked up at Dad. His brown eyes softened. “Don’t look at me like I betrayed you. Becoming Cassio’s wife isn’t as bad as you might think.”

“Irrevocably cruel. That’s what you called him. Do you remember?”

Dad nodded guiltily. “To his men and the enemy, not you.”

“How can you be sure? Why did his wife die? *How*? What if he killed her? Or abused her so horribly that she took her own life?” I sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

Dad pushed my bangs out of my face. “I’ve never seen you so scared.” He sighed. “Luca assured me that Cassio didn’t have a hand in his wife’s death.”

“Do you trust Luca? Didn’t you tell me he’s trying to establish his power?”

“I shouldn’t have told you so much.”

“And how can Luca be sure of what happened to Mrs. Moretti? You know how it is. Even a Capo doesn’t get involved in family matters.”

Dad gripped my shoulders. “Cassio won’t lay a hand on you if he knows what’s good for him.”

We both knew Dad couldn’t do anything once I was married to Cassio. And if we were being honest, he wasn’t someone who would risk getting into a conflict he would lose. Luca preferred Cassio to my father. If he had to choose between the two, Dad would find a quick end.

“He’ll come to meet you tomorrow.”

I took a step back, shocked. “Tomorrow?”

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TWO

Mom had been very clear that I wouldn't meet Cassio until our official introduction during dinner. I was supposed to stay in my room all afternoon while my parents and my future husband discussed my future as if I was a two-year-old without an opinion.

Dressed in my favorite denim overall dress, and beneath it a white tank top with sunflowers, I crept out of my room when I heard the bell. Barefoot, I made no noise as I tiptoed toward the upper landing, avoiding every creaking board.

I knelt down to make myself smaller and peered through the banister. From the sound of the voices, my parents were exchanging pleasantries with two men. Dad came into view, smiling his official smile, followed by Mother who radiated delight. Then two men came into my field of vision.

It wasn't difficult to guess which one was Cassio. He towered over Dad and the second man. Now I got why they compared him to Luca. He was broad and tall, and the dark-blue three-piece suit made him appear even more imposing. His expression was steel. Even my mother batting her eyelashes didn't tease a smile out of him. At least his companion looked like he wanted to be here. Cassio didn't look *old*—and definitely not fat. His muscles showed even through the layers of fabric he wore. His face was all sharp angles and dark stubble. It was an intentional stubble, not the one screaming lack of time or care.

Cassio was a grown man, a very imposing, powerful man, and I had only just finished high school. What were he and I supposed to talk about?

I loved modern art, drawing, and Pilates. I doubted any of those things mattered to a man like him. Torture and laundering money were most likely his favorite pastimes—and maybe the occasional whore. Anxiety tightened my insides. In less than four months, I'd have to sleep with this man, with this stranger. With a man who might have driven his wife into death.

A flicker of guilt filled me. I was making assumptions. Cassio had lost his wife and was left to tend to his children by himself. What if he was a man in mourning? He didn't look it, though.

Still, considering that men in our world learned to hide their true feelings from a young age, his lack of emotion didn't mean anything.

"Why don't we go into my office for a glass of my best cognac and chat about the marriage?" Dad motioned down the corridor.

Cassio inclined his head.

"I'll make sure everything goes smoothly in the kitchen. Our chef's preparing a feast for tonight," Mom said enthusiastically.

Both Cassio and his companion gave my mother a tight-lipped smile.

Did that man ever truly smile with his eyes and his heart?

I waited until they had all disappeared from view before I hurried downstairs and slipped inside the library, which was right beside the office. I pressed my ear against the connecting door to listen in on the conversation.

"This union will be good for you and me both," Dad said.

"Have you told Giulia about the bond yet?"

Hearing my name in Cassio's deep voice for the very first time made my heart speed up. I'd hear him say it for the rest of my life.

Dad cleared his throat. Even without seeing him, I knew he was uncomfortable. "Yes, last night."

"How did she react?"

"Giulia is aware that it's an honor to marry an Underboss."

I rolled my eyes. I really wished I could see their faces.

"That doesn't answer my question, Felix," Cassio reminded my father with a hint of annoyance in his voice. "She'll not only become my wife. I need a mother for my children. You realize that, yes?"

"Giulia is a very caring and responsible… *woman*." The word didn't fall easily from Dad's lips, and it took me a moment to realize he meant me. I

didn’t feel like a woman yet. “She’s kept watch over her brother’s child on occasion and enjoyed it.”

I’d played with my brother’s toddler for a few minutes when they visited, but I had never changed a diaper or fed a child.

“I can assure you Giulia will satisfy you.”

My cheeks heated. There was a moment of silence. Had Cassio and his companion misunderstood Dad’s words like I had?

Dad cleared his throat again. “Have you told Luca yet?”

“Last night, after our call, yes.”

They began discussing an upcoming meeting with the Capo, which caused me to zone out for a bit, getting lost in my thoughts.

“I need to call home. And Faro and I would like to relax for a bit before dinner. We’ve had a long day,” Cassio said.

“Of course. Why don’t you go ahead through that door. The library is quiet. We still have an hour until I introduce you to my daughter.”

I stumbled away from the door when steps rang out behind it. The handle moved, and I quickly rushed behind one of the bookshelves, pressing myself against it. I glanced toward the door. Cassio and Faro stepped inside. Dad gave them another fake smile then closed the door, locking me in with them. How was I supposed to get out of the library and upstairs with Cassio and his companion around?

“And?” Faro asked.

Cassio moved farther into the room and closer to me. He was frowning, but some of the vigilance had disappeared. “Exhausting. Mrs. Rizzo in particular. I hope her daughter doesn’t take after her.”

I pursed my lips in indignation. Mom was exhausting, true, but his words rubbed me the wrong way.

“Have you seen a photo of her?” Faro picked up one of the frames from the side table, chuckling.

Peering through the gap in the books, my eyes widened in horror. He held it up for Cassio to see. I was nine years old in that photo and grinning widely, showing off my braces. Two small sunflowers were attached to the sides of my pigtails, and I was dressed in a polka-dotted dress with red rubber boots. Dad loved that photo of me and had refused to remove it despite Mom’s nagging. Now I wished he’d listened to her.

“Fuck it, Faro. Put that down,” Cassio said sharply, making me wince. “I feel like a fucking pedophile looking at that child.”

Faro put the frame down. “She’s a cute kid. It could be worse.”

“I sincerely hope she got rid of those braces and awful bangs.”

My hand flew to my bangs. A mix of anger and mortification washed over me.

“It works for the schoolgirl look,” Faro said.

“I don’t want to fuck a goddamn schoolgirl.”

I flinched and my elbow collided with a book. It fell over in the shelf.

Oh no. Silence descended over the room.

I looked around frantically for an escape. Ducking my head, I tried to slip into the next aisle. Too late. A shadow fell over me, and I collided with a hard body. I stumbled back into the shelf. My tailbone hit the hard wood, causing me to cry out in pain.

My head shot up, my cheeks flaming. “I’m sorry, sir,” I blurted. My proper upbringing be damned.

Cassio stared down at me, glowering. Then realization settled on his features.

As far as first impressions went, this could have gone smoother.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

I looked down at the girl before me. She watched me with huge blue eyes and parted lips. Then I realized who the girl was. Giulia Rizzo, my future wife.

I stared. Beside me, Faro was holding back laughter, but I wasn’t close to fucking amusement. The woman—the girl—who would become my wife in less than three months had just called me “sir.”

My eyes raked over her body, taking in her bare feet, slender legs, ugly denim dress, and the flowery atrocity she wore as a top. Finally, my eyes

settled on her face. She still had bangs, but the rest of her hair was long and wavy, trailing down her bare shoulders.

She raised her eyes when I didn't make a move to let her past and stiffened, obviously surprised by my unwavering attention.

I had to admit that the bangs didn't look half bad. She was very pretty. A lovely girl. That was the problem. Dressed as she was, she looked like a teenage girl, not a woman—definitely not a wife and mother.

She touched her bangs with shaking fingers, a blush creeping over her cheeks.

She must have heard everything we'd said.

I sighed. This was a bad idea. I knew it from the start, but things had been agreed upon and now there was no going back. She would become my wife and hopefully never call me sir again.

She dropped her hand and straightened. "Excuse me, sir, I don't mean to offend you, but you shouldn't be alone with me without supervision, much less stand this close to me."

Faro gave me a look that made it clear he was close to pissing himself.

I narrowed my eyes at Giulia, not stepping back, but I had to admit I liked that she stood up to me despite the power I held. "You know who I am?"

"Yes, you are Underboss in Philadelphia, but I fall under the rule of my father, not yours, and even if I did, honor forbids me to be alone with a man I'm not married to."

"That's true," I said quietly. "But in less than four months you will be my wife."

She tipped her chin up, trying to look taller. Her show was impressive, but her shaking fingers and wide eyes betrayed her fear.

"How I see it… you spied on us. We had a confidential conversation that you barged in on without permission," I said in a low voice.

She looked away. "I was in the library when you came in and startled me."

Faro started laughing beside me. I silenced him with a glare and heaved a sigh. I didn't have the patience for drama. For weeks, I'd hardly slept through a night. The maids took most of the work off my hands, but Simona's crying woke me anyway. I needed a mother for my children, not another child to take care of. "Faro, can you give us a moment?"

Giulia regarded me with uncertainty, still backed into that shelf. I took a step away from her, giving her the appropriate space. Faro left and closed the door.

“This is inappropriate,” she said in her soft voice.

“I want to have a quick word with you. Later, your parents will be around and we won’t have time to talk.”

“My mother will do all the talking. She’s exhausting like that.”

Was she teasing me? Her face was curious and cautious.

“That wasn’t meant for your ears.” I motioned toward the armchairs. “Will you talk to me?”

She tilted her head as if she tried to understand me. “Of course.”

I waited for her to sit before I took my own seat. She crossed her legs, then smoothed her bangs again, but flushed when she saw me watching. Her nose twitched. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell my mother about this —”

“Don’t call me sir,” I growled.

She winced, stunned. “What am I supposed to call you?”

“How about you call me Cassio? I’ll be your husband soon.”

She released a shaky breath. “November.”

“Yes. Once you turn eighteen.”

“Does it make a difference? How do a few more months make me a viable wife when I’m not now?”

“You’re too young either way, but I’ll feel more comfortable marrying you when you’re of age officially.”

She pursed her lips and shook her head.

“I have two small children who need taking care of. Daniele is two, almost three then, and Simona will be ten months when we marry.”

“Can you show me photos?” she asked, surprising me.

I took out my phone and showed her my background: a photo taken shortly before Gaia’s death, but she wasn’t in it. Daniele was cradling his four-month-old sister in his arms.

I watched Giulia’s face. Her expression softened, and she smiled—an unguarded, honest smile. Not like the smiles I was used to from the women in our circles. That, too, showed how young she was. Not yet jaded and guarded.

“They are adorable. And how cute he’s holding her.” She smiled at me then became serious. “I’m sorry for your loss. I—”

“I don’t want to talk about my dead wife,” I clipped.

She nodded quickly and bit her lip. Fuck, why did she have to look cute and innocent. There were so many teenage girls who plastered their faces with enough makeup to add ten years to their true age—not Giulia. She looked like seventeen, and she wouldn’t miraculously look older in four months when she turned eighteen. I’d have to ask her mother to put lots of makeup on her face for the wedding day.

She tugged her hair behind one ear, revealing a sunflower earring.

“Do you always dress like this?” I motioned at her attire.

She glanced down her body with a small frown. “I like dresses.” The blush on her cheeks darkened when she looked at me.

“I like dresses too,” I said. “Elegant dresses, fitting for a woman. I expect you to dress more elegant in the future. You have to convey a certain image to the outside. If you give me your measurements, I’ll send someone out to buy you a new wardrobe.”

She stared.

“Understood?” I asked when she remained silent.

She blinked then nodded.

“Good,” I said. “There won’t be an official engagement celebration. I don’t have time for it, and I don’t want us to be seen together in public before you are of age.”

“Will I meet your children before we marry? Or see your mansion?”

“No. We won’t see each other until November, and you will meet Daniele and Simona the day after our wedding.”

“Don’t you think it would be good if we got to know each other before we marry?”

“I don’t see how that matters,” I said sharply.

She looked away. “Is there anything else you expect from me, except for a change in wardrobe?”

I considered asking her to start the pill because I didn’t want any more children, but I couldn’t bring myself to talk to a girl her age about it, which was ridiculous considering I’d have to bed her on our wedding night.

I stood. “No. Now you should probably leave before your parents realize we were alone.”

She stood then regarded me for a moment, cupping her elbows in her palms. She turned and left without another word. After she’d left, Faro came back inside.

He raised his eyebrows. “What did you say? The girl looked like she was going to cry.”

My brows drew together. “Nothing.”

“I doubt it, but if you say so.”

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THREE

I was still shaking when I entered my bedroom after my first encounter with Cassio. He had been intense and cold, not to mention dominant. Ordering me to change my wardrobe? How dare he?

"There you are! Where have you been?" Mom asked, ushering me toward my walk-in closet. "We need to get you ready. For God's sake, Giulia, what are you wearing?"

She tugged at my clothes until I started undressing, still in a trance. Mom gave me a curious look. "What's with you?"

"Nothing," I said quietly.

Mom turned to the selection of dresses she must have spread out on the bench before I'd arrived. "I can't believe you don't own a single decent dress."

I'd always avoided going to official events because I hated the insincere schmoozing and backstabbing attitude of those who attended them. "What's wrong with the dresses I own?"

Mom had chosen the three least quirky dresses from my collection. All of them were in my favorite retro Audrey Hepburn style. Mom picked up a sky-blue dress with white dots. "Don't you have anything solid-colored?"

"No," I said. Had she never paid attention to my clothes?

I had Dad to thank for the freedom to wear what I liked. While he was conservative, he had trouble saying no to me. Mom had no choice but to bow to his command.

Mom sighed then handed the blue dress to me. “This matches your eyes. Let’s hope Cassio isn’t put off by the ridiculous style.”

I put the dress on without a word, remembering Cassio’s words about my clothes and my bangs.

“Put on makeup, Giulia. You need to look older.”

I gave her an exasperated expression, but she was already on her way out. “And wear heels!”

Taking a deep breath, I blinked to stop the tears from falling. I’d been lucky so far. I preferred to turn a blind eye to the realities of mob life, but I knew what went on behind closed doors. Our world was a cruel one. Dad had been good to me, but I’d seen how many of my cousins had been abused by their fathers, how my uncles treated their wives.

My last fiancé had been close to my age, a quiet almost shy boy that Dad had chosen to protect me. I could have held my ground against him in a marriage. That would be a difficult task with Cassio. I didn’t like to give in to negative emotions, but my fear was an acute pain in my chest.

Grabbing blue heels, I headed for my vanity. My eyes were glassy when I checked my reflection. I put on more makeup than usual, but still much less than Mom and Cassio probably expected.

When I made my way downstairs for the official introductions, I’d managed to calm myself. My eyes still felt too warm from almost crying, but my smile didn’t waver when I descended the stairs toward Dad, Cassio, and his companion Faro.

Dad took my hand, squeezing it as he led me toward my future husband. Cassio’s expression was a masterpiece of controlled politeness as he regarded me. His eyes were dark blue, like the depth of the ocean, and gave the impression that they could swallow you just as easily as the bottomless sea. Disapproval flashed across his face when he took in my dress.

“Cassio, meet my daughter, Giulia.” A hint of warning rang in Dad’s voice, which bounced right off Cassio’s stoic demeanor.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Giulia.” His mouth pulled into an almost non-existent smile as he took my hand and kissed it. I trembled.

Dark blue eyes flashed up to mine, and I straightened my spine. “The pleasure is all mine, s—Cassio.”

Dad glanced between Cassio and me, worried. Maybe he finally realized that he’d thrown me to a wolf. Dad tried to intimidate my future husband with a dark look, but a sheep didn’t become a predator by wearing

a wolf fur, and Dad had never been more than prey among the blood-thirsty monsters in our circles.

Cassio straightened, ignoring Dad, and motioned toward his companion. “That’s my right hand and Consigliere, Faro.”

I held out my hand, but Faro didn’t take it and only politely inclined his head. Dropping my arm, I shifted closer to Dad, who scanned my face. He looked torn, and I felt sick satisfaction over his obvious conflict.

“I’ll send a new wardrobe over for Giulia. Please tell your wife to take your daughter’s measurements,” Cassio said. “I need a woman at my side, not a girl.”

That was too much for Dad. “Maybe this was a mistake, and I should cancel our agreement.”

Cassio moved in front of Dad, staring down at him with a look that turned my stomach. “We shook hands on the engagement, Felix. We settled matters with Luca. Everything is agreed upon. Given that we decided against a separate engagement, that makes Giulia my fiancée, and I’m telling you now that nobody, least of all you, will prevent this marriage.”

Maybe Cassio hadn’t wanted me, but he certainly wouldn’t allow anyone to take me away from him.

I held my breath. This was Dad’s home, and he ruled over this city. He only bowed down to Luca, certainly not to another Underboss.

At least, that was how it should have been.

Yet Dad cleared his throat and lowered his eyes. “I have no intention of canceling our arrangement. I was only making a point.”

What point?

Cassio’s expression asked the same question. Mom barged in that moment, completely oblivious to what was going on. “Dinner is ready!”

Her smile fell when she saw us.

Cassio held out his arm for me to take. I glanced at Dad, but he avoided my eyes. The message was clear: from this day on, Cassio would lead the way.

I put my palm on my fiancé’s strong forearm. If Dad couldn’t protect me anymore, that meant I’d have to protect myself. Cassio led me into the dining room, following Mom, who was babbling about possible color schemes for our wedding. Cassio probably didn’t care the slightest bit. As a man, he wouldn’t even have to pretend otherwise—unlike me, the happy future bride.

When we arrived at the dining table, he pulled out the chair for me.

“Thank you.” I sank down, smoothing out my dress.

Cassio took the seat across from me. His eyes lingered on my bangs before they moved on to my flower earrings, probably deciding what new haircut he’d order me to get and what jewelry to buy for me.

He wanted to turn me into the wife he wanted, mold me like clay. Maybe he thought my age made me a spineless marionette that would bow down to her master at the slightest tug at her strings.

I met his gaze. I’d learned the subtle art of getting my way with a smile and kindness, the only way a woman could get what she wanted in our world. Would it work with Cassio? Dad always melted when I batted my lashes, but I had a feeling Cassio wouldn’t be easily swayed.

A week later, two packages filled with dresses, skirts, and blouses arrived on our doorstep. Mom could hardly contain her excitement as she unpacked clothes by Max Mara, Chanel, Ted Baker, and many other of her favorite designers. The dresses were pretty and elegant. They weren’t me at all.

I understood Cassio’s need to portray a certain image to the public, and at official events I definitely wouldn’t have worn my sunflower dress, I just wished he’d asked me to buy a few elegant clothes and not bought them for me as if he didn’t value my opinion—which was, of course, the case.

The four months until November flew by—an endless row of sleepless nights, teary tantrums, and hard workdays.

On the morning of my bachelor night, I squatted in front of Daniele. He was staring down at the iPad, watching a series he liked. His hair was tousled in the front and knotted in the back, but he refused to let Sybil comb it. I hadn't had the patience to hold him while she did it. We'd have to buzz it short once the wedding was over. "Daniele, I need to talk to you."

He didn't look up. I reached for the iPad, but he twisted around. "Give it to me."

His small shoulders rounded in. It was his only reaction. I grabbed the device and pulled it away. "Soon someone will move in with us. She'll be your new mom. She'll take care of you and Simona."

Daniele's face scrunched up, and he threw himself at me, pummeling my legs with his little fists. "That's enough," I thundered, grabbing his arms.

My anger disappeared seeing tears running down his face. "Daniele."

I tried to hug him to my chest, but he squirmed away. Eventually, I released him. In the days after Gaia's death, Daniele had sought my closeness; now he was back to ignoring me. I wasn't sure what Gaia had told him before her death, but it was clear that it made Daniele resent me.

I put the iPad down in front of him then straightened. Without another word, I left and went upstairs to Simona's room. The nanny hurried out. In a few days, I'd finally be able to get rid of the nannies, and Giulia would take care of Simona. I bent over the crib. Simona stared up at me and smiled a toothless grin. I gently slipped my palms under her tiny body and lifted her into my arms. Cradling her against my chest, I stroked her dark blond head. Both Daniele and she had inherited their mother's hair color and eyes. Pressing a kiss to Simona's forehead, I remembered the first time I did it two days after she was born. Gaia had refused to have me present while she gave birth to our daughter and only allowed me near her on the second day. Anger resurfaced as it always did when I remembered the past. Simona babbled, and I kissed her forehead again. She cried when someone other than my sisters, mother, or I held her. I could only hope she'd quickly grow used to Giulia's presence.

I put her back down even though her cries tore at my heart. I needed to get ready for a meeting with Luca and then my bachelor night after.

An hour before the official start of my bachelor night, which Faro had organized for me, I met with Luca in my office. He and his wife Aria had arrived a day early so he could see how business was going in Philadelphia. He wouldn't find reason to worry. I'd forgone sleep to make sure everything worked smoothly in my city. Luca and I settled on the armchairs in my office. I was surprised he'd agreed to come along to my stag party. Since his marriage to Aria, he'd pulled back a bit.

"My aunt went all out with the wedding planning," Luca said as he lounged in the armchair. "She thought of everything from doves and ice sculptures to silk bed linen."

White silk bed linen. Linen I was supposed to stain with my young wife's blood on our wedding night.

I took a sip from my scotch then lowered it. "There won't be a presentation of the sheets because I won't be sleeping with Giulia."

Luca lowered his glass slowly, his gray eyes narrowing. He knew it wasn't because of Gaia, even if I hadn't been with another woman since her death. "It's tradition. It has been for centuries."

"I know and I honor our traditions, but there won't be a presentation of sheets this time." Those words could very well mean my downfall. It wasn't my choice to ignore our traditions. Only Luca could make that decision, and it was clear he wouldn't. I'd considered sleeping with Giulia. She was pretty, but I couldn't get the image of her innocent, wide eyes out of my head or how young she'd looked in her ridiculous clothes without a touch of makeup. The women of my past had been my age—grown women that could take what I gave.

"With your first marriage, you had no trouble following our tradition. It's not something you can follow as you see fit," Luca said sharply.

"The last time I married, the woman was close to me in age. I'm almost fourteen years older than my future wife. She called me 'sir' the first time she saw me. She's a girl."

"She is of age, Cassio. Today is her birthday."

I nodded. "You know I do what you ask me to do. You know I rule over Philadelphia without mercy as you expect me to do, but even I have certain

lines I’m not willing to cross, and I won’t force myself on a girl.”

“She’s of age and nobody says you have to use force,” Luca repeated and I lost my shit.

I crashed the glass down on the table. “That she is, but I’d still feel like I was manhandling her. You can’t honestly believe she will come willingly into my bed. Perhaps she will submit because she knows it’s her only option, but that’s not *willing*. I have a daughter, Luca, and I wouldn’t want her to be with a man thirteen years her senior.”

Luca regarded me for a long time, maybe considering putting a bullet in my head. He didn’t tolerate defiance. “You *will* present sheets after your wedding night, Cassio.” I opened my mouth to refuse him again. “No discussion. How you create bloody sheets is up to you.”

I sat back, wary. “What is it you are suggesting?”

“I’m not suggesting anything,” Luca said. “I’m only telling you that I want to see bloody sheets, and I and everyone else will take them as proof of your wife’s honor and your ruthlessness as is expected.”

Maybe I was wrong, but I was fairly certain Luca was suggesting I fake the bloody sheets. I took another sip of my scotch, wondering if Luca had experience faking blood stains. I had been at the presentation of the sheets after his wedding night with Aria, but even as I tried, I couldn’t imagine Luca sparing anyone. I had seen him ripping out a man’s tongue for disrespecting Aria and had been there when he’d crushed his uncle’s throat. Maybe he was testing me. Maybe he was suggesting something like that so he could see if I was too weak to bed my wife. Growing up in our world, I’d learned to see the warning signs. If I failed a test given by my Capo, the end result was inevitable. I’d be removed from my position in the only acceptable way—by death. While I didn’t fear dying, I loathed the idea of what that would mean for Daniele and Simona. They’d cruelly lost their mother. If I, too, abandoned them, it would cause horrible trauma to my kids.

Showing any kind of weakness in this situation would be fatal. I would not risk my children’s health nor my position as Underboss.

I took a sip. “I’ll do what you ask of me, Luca, like my father and I have always done.”

Luca inclined his head, but the tension lingered between us. I’d have to watch my back until I’d proven myself again.

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FOUR

Cassio

Faro handed me a flask. “For you.”

I tugged my tie into place before taking the gift. “I won’t drink hard liquor today.”

“I thought you could use it to hit yourself over the head if you consider something as stupid as refusing the bloody sheet tradition again.”

I shoved the flask into the pocket on the inside of my jacket. “Don’t get started again.”

Faro glared. “Just promise you won’t try this faking blood stains bullshit. Luca was baiting you. Trust me, he fucked that wife of his on their wedding night, even if she cried bitter tears. That’s who he is and who he expects you to be. And come on, Cassio, you are that man, so stop trying to be a better man only because you feel guilty over Gaia.”

I gripped his throat. “We are friends, Faro, but I’m also your boss, so show some respect.”

Faro spluttered, his brown eyes watering. “I’m trying to keep you alive. Giulia is a grown woman by age. That’s all that should matter.”

“I’m going to fuck her, so get off my back,” I gritted out, releasing him. I hadn’t seen her since our first and only encounter four months ago, but I knew she still looked young—younger than I preferred. A few months wouldn’t change that. I could only hope that her mother had followed my instructions and put enough makeup on her face to make her look older.

Faro grinned. “Do me a favor and enjoy it, will you? Tonight, you’ll have a tight young pussy around your cock.”

He left the room before I could grab him again.

I waited at the front of the church for Giulia. Faro stood to my right and across from him waited one of Giulia’s friends, who looked awfully young. A reminder of my own future wife’s age.

When the music started, I turned my attention to the entrance of the church where Felix entered with Giulia at his side. She was dressed in an elegant long white dress with a long-sleeved lace top. Her hair was pulled up, except for her bangs.

She was smiling slightly as her father led her toward me, but her tension was unmistakable. When she arrived in front of me, I noticed the small sunflowers woven into her hair and bridal bouquet. Her eyes met mine, and for a moment I caught the hint of defiance in them, surprising me. Then her father handed her to me, and Giulia became tenser, her smile wavering.

She looked marginally older thanks to the makeup and her elegant dress. Still, her fine-boned, clammy hand in mine and the innocence in her eyes reminded me of her age.

Despite her youth, she kept her head high, appearing at ease with the situation. Only I could feel her trembling. Her “I do” was firm, as if this bond was really her choice.

While we exchanged the rings, Giulia kept throwing uncertain glances up at me. I wasn’t sure what she was looking for. Maybe wistfulness or even sadness. I remembered my first wedding. Sadness wasn’t part of my feelings when I thought of Gaia.

“You may kiss the bride,” the priest said.

Giulia’s eyes widened a fraction, as if that part of the ceremony came as a surprise. Hundreds of eyes watched us, one set belonging to my Capo. I cupped the back of her head and bent low. She remained frozen, except for her eyes which fluttered shut a moment before I firmly pressed my mouth against hers. Until this moment, physical closeness with Giulia had seemed like something that I’d have to force myself to allow, a struggle forgetting

her age and the baggage I carried with me. Now, as her soft lips touched mine and her sweet scent hit me, a deeply buried desire kindled inside me. Claiming her tonight wouldn’t be a problem. Being a better man definitely wasn’t in my future.

I pulled back, causing Giulia to open her eyes. She held my gaze, a blush creeping up her cheeks. Then she gave me a small, shy smile. So goddamn innocent.

I straightened, looking away from her pretty, young face. From the corner of my eye, I saw her puzzled expression before I led her down the aisle and out of the church for the congratulations.

Faro, of course, was the first to congratulate me. He clapped my shoulder with a challenging smile. “And how was the first taste of your young wife?” he asked in a low voice.

I scowled. He knew very well that I rarely shared information like that. It didn’t stop him from asking, of course. He stepped back and faced Giulia, giving a small bow. Her answering smile was the kind of unguarded friendliness that gave proof of her age. As my wife, she’d have to learn to be more restrained. Gaia had been the perfect hostess and trophy wife, poised and a master of social etiquette, a quick liar, someone who smiled at you one moment only to stab you in the back the next. Giulia wasn’t like that. She’d have to grow up quickly, learn the ins and outs of being an Underboss’s wife.

My eyes lingered on the small sunflowers in her updo. Those would have to go first. Too lighthearted, too quirky. Nothing I appreciated. The sunflower earrings were even worse. She should have worn the jewelry I sent her. I leaned down to her. “Why didn’t you wear the diamond earrings I bought for you?”

I jumped at the cold disapproval in his voice.

Mom and Dad headed toward us to congratulate us, which didn't give me much time for a reply. "They didn't match the flower arrangement."

I'd fought Mom for weeks over having sunflowers as part of my bridal flowers. Eventually, Dad had settled the matter in my favor, as he usually did.

"You shouldn't have chosen sunflowers. Next time I send you something to wear, I expect you to do it."

I blinked, too stunned for a reply. He straightened. For him, this matter was settled. He'd given an order and naturally expected me to obey. There was no doubt in his mind that I would. His expression was steel when he shook Dad's hand.

Mom pulled me into an embrace, dragging my eyes away from my husband. A frown appeared on her face. "Look happy, Giulia," she whispered. "Don't you realize how lucky you are? I'd have never thought we'd manage to marry you off to an Underboss, considering all of them were already married. This is such a stroke of luck."

My smile felt stiff. What was a stroke of luck? That Gaia Moretti had died, leaving two small children behind? That I was married to the man who might be responsible for her death?

Mom's expression pinched. "For God's sake, try harder to look happy. Don't ruin this for us."

Mom didn't even realize how cruel she was.

Luckily, Dad stepped up to me and hugged me. I sank into him. He and I had always been closer, but recently my resentment had clouded our relationship. "You look beautiful."

"I don't think Cassio agrees," I muttered. Dad pulled back, searching my face. His guilt and worry added another weight to my already heavy heart.

"I'm sure he appreciates your beauty," Dad said quietly.

I kissed Dad's cheek, and he reluctantly moved away to make room for Cassio's parents. I'd never talked to them and had only seen them from afar at a couple of social functions. Mr. Moretti shared Cassio's dark blue eyes, but his were clouded and his impressive size was diminished by the fact that he supported his weight on a cane. Cassio's mother was elegant and beautiful with dark blond hair pulled up into a perfect chignon. Behind her,

Cassio's sisters waited, no less graceful and poised. That was how I was supposed to be. Cassio didn't want me for myself. He wanted me to become someone he required. Accessories in his life.

I could hardly force food down my tight throat during dinner. Cassio didn't talk to me, only to his father and Luca. I sat beside him like arm candy.

Maybe it was for the best. Every time he'd talked to me so far, he ordered me around and intimidated me only more. Considering that I'd have to share a bed with him tonight, I preferred his silence. The chances of me passing out were high anyway.

I slanted a look at Cassio. His facial features were attractive in an edgy way. Sharp cheekbones, a strong jaw, and the dark stubble. I'd never seen him in less than a three-piece suit, but his muscles were unmistakable.

"My brother played football in high school," Mia whispered, surprising me. I hadn't said much to her yet. We were strangers, despite being sisters-in-law, not to mention she was ten years older than me.

Heat rose into my cheeks, realizing she must have noticed me staring at Cassio. I couldn't even imagine Cassio going to high school.

"You finished this summer, right?" Mia asked.

I nodded with a small smile. "Yes. I thought I'd go to college, but…"

"But you had to marry my brother."

"I would have had to marry either way, but as a wife of an Underboss, going to college is out of the question," I said quietly. My mother would have had a heart attack if she'd heard me being this honest with Cassio's sister, but I was tired of trying to pretend.

"That's true. You'll be busy raising his kids, so you won't be bored."

My heart sped up like it always did thinking of being responsible for two tiny humans. I had absolutely no clue about kids. I'd read countless articles about raising kids in the last four months, but reading and doing were two very different things. Most of the time I felt like a girl, not a woman, much less a mother.

Mia touched my hand. "You'll be fine. I live close by. I can help if you don't know what to do."

Cassio must have heard because he frowned. “You have two small kids of your own with a third on the way. You’ll have your hands full. Giulia can handle everything.”

He seemed to know me better than I did. Or maybe he’d just order me to be a good mother?

Mia sighed, but she didn’t talk back to him. My stomach knotted even more.

I was wound so tightly when it was time for the first dance, I hardly noticed Cassio leading me to the center of the ballroom. The guests gathered around it, watching. My smile was in place. If I’d learned one thing from my mother, it was to smile in the face of adversity.

With our difference in height, dancing wasn’t easy. If we’d been a real couple, I could have rested my cheek against his sternum. Right now we were casual acquaintances at best. Cassio led me over the dance floor without a hitch, sure in his leadership like in every other aspect of our life. My mind was spinning a hundred miles an hour, imagining our future, imagining tonight.

“Why are you trembling?” Cassio asked, startling me.

I regarded his emotionless eyes. Did he really not know? “Why don’t you order me to stop? Maybe my body obeys your command.”

Cassio’s expression hardened. “I expect you to choose your words more carefully in public. I’m your husband and you’ll respect me.”

I lowered my eyes to his chest, the smile still frozen on my face.

Cassio’s mouth pressed to my ear as the dance ended. “Understood?”

“Understood, *sir*.”

Cassio’s grip on me tightened, but he didn’t get the chance to say more because it was Dad’s turn to dance with me. He kept asking what was wrong, but I really didn’t see any reason to tell him. There was nothing he could do, nothing he would do. Mom’s lips were moving nonstop during her dance with my husband. From her delighted expression, you’d think she was the happy bride.

“It’s my turn,” Christian said.

My smile became less stiff as my brother took over. He gave me a quick smile as we began to dance. I rarely saw him anymore since he’d moved out five years ago at eighteen. Unlike many sons from Underbosses, he’d chosen not to work under Dad in Baltimore until he inherited the title

himself. Christian had wanted to make a name for himself and had gone to work under the Morettis.

“It’s so good to see you,” I said, hugging him tighter.

He gave a terse nod. “It is.”

“You don’t look happy that I’ll live in the same city as you soon.”

Christian shook his head. “Not at this price.”

“You mean me being married to Cassio?”

Christian looked around, but Cassio was dancing with one of his sisters a good distance away. “He’s not the right man for you.”

“Because he’s too old.”

Christian let out a derisive laugh. “That’s only a small part of why.”

“Do you know what happened to Gaia?” I hadn’t seen my brother since I’d found out I’d marry Cassio. Asking that kind of question over the phone was too dangerous. You never knew if the FBI was listening.

“Only Luca, Mansueto, and Cassio know.” He hesitated.

“And?”

“The clean-up crew. Both of them died shortly after in a *tragic* car accident.”

For a moment I was sure I hadn’t heard him right. My vision was starting to tunnel. “Dad said Cassio didn’t have a hand in his wife’s death.”

Anger flashed across Christian’s face. “Dad needs Cassio’s support to stay in power. Dad’s a weak boss. It’s only a matter of time before others will try to have him removed. With Cassio in the family, people will hesitate. If I already were in power, I wouldn’t have given you to him. I would have controlled our men myself.”

Power plays. It wasn’t something I wanted to be part of, but without my own doing, I’d become the pawn in this deadly game.

“You’ve worked under Cassio the last few years. Is he really that bad?”

Christian’s expression flickered with regret. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

I dug my fingers into his arm. “Tell me, please. I need to prepare myself.” Though, how could you prepare for that?

“He’s effective and brutal. He doesn’t tolerate disobedience. He’s got his men under control. Few men in our circles are as well respected as him. He’s the best Underboss that the Famiglia has at the moment.” Christian shook his head. “I should talk to him.”

“No,” I whispered, terrified. If what Christian had said was true, Cassio wouldn’t allow my brother to get involved. Christian was a brave man, and he’d be a good Underboss one day, but risking his life for me? I wouldn’t allow it. “Promise, you won’t say anything. Swear it.”

“I want to help you.”

“Then tell me what to do to make this marriage with him work.”

He laughed mirthlessly. “How would I know?” Our dance ended, and he fell silent, his mouth twisting in disgust. “Obey him.”

Despair weighed down on me. Four months ago, my main concern was what kind of Pilates course I’d do and if I’d find time to finish a painting. Today, I had to worry about how to please a husband, who might have killed his wife and probably the men who’d cleaned up the scene afterward.

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FIVE

After the dance with my brother, I wanted nothing more than to find a quiet corner to get a grip, but Cassio's father limped toward me.

I gave him a smile as my brother slinked away after a curt nod. Mr. Moretti held out his hand. "Will you give this old man the honor of dancing with the bride?"

"Of course, Mr. Moretti," I said with a small curtsy.

"Mansueto, please. We're family now."

I nodded and took his hand, wondering how this was going to work with his cane. He smiled wistfully. "We'll have to dance in one spot if you're all right with that, young lady."

Again, I nodded and stepped a bit closer. He handed his cane to a man I didn't know and lightly touched my back. Then we began to sway to the music.

"You're very quiet. From what I hear, you're not a quiet girl."

My cheeks heated, wondering who had given him that piece of information. Christian? Definitely not my mother.

Mansueto's eyes were kind, but like his son, his reputation was chilling. "My son's reputation makes me proud," he began as if he could read my mind, which freaked me out. "I know he'll rule over Philadelphia without trouble, even once I'm gone. But it's a reputation that might unsettle a young woman, especially as young as yourself."

I wasn’t sure what to say. I felt like I should contradict him because tradition dictated that I pretend I wasn’t unsettled by my husband, but that would have been a lie, and unfortunately, I was a bad liar, much to Mom’s chagrin.

“My wife and I raised my son to respect women, and from what I know, he does.”

From what I knew, the bets on him killing his wife in a rampant rage were winning. He didn’t appear like someone who would lose control like that, but he had earned his reputation as one of the cruelest leaders in our circles for a reason, and Christian’s words had only confirmed my fears.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said, because I had to say something. I didn’t feel consoled. The song ended and we stopped our swaying. Faro stood with his last dance partner to my left. I caught his eye, thinking as best man and Consigliere, he’d want a dance.

He shook his head with an apologetic smile. “If I ever tire of life, I’ll ask for that dance.” He turned and asked another woman.

Flabbergasted, I stared at Mansueto.

He laughed. “Come on, let’s head back to the table.”

“What was that?” I asked as I followed his slow progress toward the table where Cassio was still conversing with Luca as if this was a business meeting and not our wedding.

“My son is a bit territorial, I’m afraid. You can dance with family, but please refrain from approaching other men. I’d hate to witness a conflict at your wedding.”

I waited for his laugh, something that indicated he was joking. He didn’t. I stopped and so did he. “I think I’ll freshen up.”

He nodded, but his expression showed he knew I wanted to run. With a small smile, I turned on my heel and hurried out of the ballroom.

I rushed past the restrooms and turned a corner into a deserted corridor where I leaned against the wall and slowly sank down. My dress bunched around me like a pure white bubble.

It wasn’t dignified, and if someone found me, that would be a scandal for which Mom would never forgive me. I couldn’t bring myself to care. This was my life.

I wasn’t sure how long I sat like that, considering my few options, when steps echoed down the hall. With my dress, I didn’t have the chance to stand up quickly, so I didn’t bother.

Mia turned the corner and upon spotting me, she headed my way with a look of concern. She surprised me when she sank down beside me in her elegant long dress and bulging belly.

“Cassio is a difficult man, Giulia. I won’t lie.”

I chuckled. Difficult I could deal with. It was the character traits beyond difficult that worried me.

All evening, I kept an eye on my wife. She wasn’t comfortable with my close proximity. Her trembling during our dance had made that clear. That reaction didn’t bode well for tonight.

After her dance with my father, Giulia hurried out of the room, and Father came over to me. “Would you excuse us for a moment, Luca? I need to have a word with my son.”

“I’ll dance with Aria.” Luca gave us a curt nod before he headed over to his wife.

“What’s the matter?”

“Your girl is terrified. She’s trying to put up a brave front, as she’s been taught, but I can see it in her eyes.”

My gaze rested on the door through which Giulia had disappeared. “Don’t call her my girl, Father. It makes me feel even older.”

Father chuckled. “Maybe it’s good that you do. That you remember you’ve been given a wife who’s been a child not too long ago, that you need to be good to her.”

I frowned. “I have no intention of *not* being good to her.” Being good to her would be difficult, no doubt.

“Maybe you should tell her, talk to her before tonight. It would be wise to take some of her fears away in advance.”

My mouth tightened. “Father, I’m not going to discuss my wedding night with you.”

Father smiled. “I’ll thank you for that. Go talk to her, Cassio. Do your old man that small favor.”

“When she returns, I’ll have a quick word with her.”

“Cruelty has a place, Cassio. Marriage isn’t it.”

I had enough. “Do you want to have another talk about Gaia? *Today*?”

“My concern is that you forget that Giulia isn’t Gaia.”

“It seems you know my wife better than I do.”

I walked off, even if it was disrespectful, but Father was no longer Underboss. I didn’t need his guidance in that regard, nor in my marriage. Mia gave me a hard look from across the room and slipped out as well.

Giulia had been gone for a while…

Sighing, I made my way over to find my young bride. I headed toward the restroom then followed the sound of low female voices around another corner. I stopped. Mia and Giulia were sitting on the ground, their expensive dresses spread out around them. Seeing them beside each other, Giulia’s age became more apparent again. My sister was younger than me yet still looked so much older than my wife. It was a sobering realization.

The moment Giulia spotted me, tension spread in her narrow shoulders. I strode closer. “Let me talk to my wife,” I ordered Mia.

She glanced between Giulia and me before she held out her hand. I helped her to her feet. “Be a husband, not a mobster for once, how about that?” she whispered under her breath.

I ignored her. Once she had turned the corner, I held out my hand. “How about we catch some fresh air?”

Giulia put her hand in mine. Her slender, trembling fingers were clammy. I pulled her to her feet then put my hand on her back. She didn’t say anything as I led her back to the ballroom and toward the French doors leading onto the terrace of the hotel. Her mother’s eyes widened, and she glanced at the clock as if I was going to pounce on her daughter outside in the garden before the scheduled bedding time. The guests mingling outside immediately went back inside to give us space. I stopped a good distance away from the windows then looked down at my wife. With those bangs, she looked awfully cute and pretty, both of which would have been fine if they didn’t also make her appear innocent and young.

“My father told me you’re scared.” Maybe I should have found a more delicate way to broach the subject, but that wasn’t one of my strengths.

Her eyes widened, those red lips falling open. “I… I’m not… I…” She bit her lower lip and looked away. The moonlight highlighted her smooth skin, unblemished and soft-looking.

“Will you look at me?”

She raised her eyes. I ran my thumb over her fingers to the ring, and she shivered slightly. “This ring makes you mine.”

She tensed, and I realized I should have chosen different wording, something that didn’t sound like I was a Neanderthal about to claim her, not that it wasn’t true. I would claim her tonight, if only to follow traditions we both couldn’t evade, and she *was* mine, but that wasn’t what I meant to say. I wasn’t sure what to say to set her at ease. Gaia and I hadn’t talked much. She’d screamed or cried and sometimes talked sweetly when she wanted something.

“Tradition binds us, Giulia. Not just you, but also me.”

I’d sworn to protect her, like a husband was supposed to protect his wife, and I would do my best to do a better job this time.

“I know of our traditions,” she said quickly, embarrassed.

“I’m not talking about the bloody sheets.”

She swallowed. “What are you talking about, then?”

“That, as my wife, you’re also entitled to my protection.”

Giulia tilted her head, regarding me curiously. “Okay.”

I wasn’t sure if I got my point across, but I’d never been a man of many words when feelings were concerned. I’d do my best to treat her right.

Silence fell over us. I could tell that Giulia wanted to say something, perhaps even wanted me to say more, but I remained silent. I didn’t know my young wife and had no clue what she did all day except for shopping and meeting other women. She was a teenager, and I was not. I hadn’t even acted like one when I’d been her age.

“Let’s return. Our guests are waiting. It’s almost midnight.”

She tensed, but followed me inside.

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SIX

Cassio

Luca’s uncles—my fellow Underbosses that I couldn’t stand—were the first to demand I bed my wife.

Giulia and I stood with my sisters and her parents when the first shout cut through the music.

Appreciative roars and clapping followed and then a chorus of “bed her” came from most of the men.

Giulia’s father and brother did not take part in it. Christian gave me a look that bordered on threatening. At another time, I would have reacted accordingly to that kind of disrespect. Now wasn’t the time, however. He was a braver man than his father. I had to give it to him.

Giulia clutched her wine glass and gave my sister Mia an embarrassed smile.

Mia hugged me tightly. “Don’t make me kick your ass, big brother. Be good to that girl. She’s such a cutie.”

I untangled myself from my sister. I would not discuss my sex life with her.

Felix gave me a hard look, but we both knew that whatever went on tonight was no longer his responsibility. He certainly loved his daughter, but he also loved power, and if he had to choose between the two…

I turned to my wife, tired of everyone shoving their noses into our marriage. Giulia gave me a shy look, her cheeks red. I held out my hand,

and she took it without hesitation. Her palms were sweaty. “Are you ready to go upstairs?” I murmured, bending down so only she could hear me.

She swallowed, but nodded.

I turned to our families. “If you’ll excuse us?”

Before Giulia and I could take our leave, Egidia hugged her daughter once more and whispered something in her ear that drove a fierce blush into my wife’s cheeks.

Wine glass still clutched in her hand, she allowed me to lead her away. Again, we didn’t talk. I considered saying something reassuring, but the truth was there was nothing to say, and I wasn’t a man for those kinds of words anyway.

Giulia took a sip of her wine. She was on her fifth glass—at least.

“What did your mother say?” I asked to fill the tense silence between us as we took the elevator up to our suite for the night. The door slid open, and we stepped out.

Another sip. I stopped and took the glass from her. If she was intoxicated, I’d have to fake those fucking bloodstains after all. “That’s enough.”

“It’s ginger ale.”

I took a sip from the glass, surprised.

Giulia fumbled with the tiny white purse slung over her shoulder. “I only had one glass of sparkling wine at the reception. I didn’t want to be drunk.” Those big blue eyes hit me.

“What did your mother say?” I asked again, leading her the rest of the way to the suite. I unlocked the door.

Giulia pursed her lips. “That I should please you and try to mask my inexperience.” She let out a huff. “Right now, I’m just trying not to pass out from fear.”

Her eyes widened.

I opened the door and motioned for Giulia to go in. I followed and then we were alone in our suite. The living area was vast with two sofas and a dining table, where I set down her glass. It wasn’t a room we’d use, but it was custom to take the biggest suite of the hotel even if all we required was a bedroom. I looked down at my young wife, who’d just been vulnerably honest with me.

“You don’t have to be afraid, Giulia. We have all night.”

Giulia glanced around, her eyes lingering on the door to the left leading to our bedroom. “Do you think drawing it out will make it better?”

I wasn’t sure what would help Giulia. “Tell me what would help ease your fears.”

She considered that. “If it felt like I had a choice.”

“You have a choice,” I said, stepping close to her.

“Do I?” she whispered, peering up at me. “Will you really allow me a choice?”

I wanted her to have a choice. But I wouldn’t show weakness, not in front of Luca, not after I’d already displayed such during our meeting. He wouldn’t have reason to doubt me. Not even my wife’s pretty face and her cute smile could soften my resolve. But a nonexistent choice could still feel like a choice.

“I know what’s expected, Cassio. I know what it would mean for you and my father if we don’t present sheets in the morning.” She swallowed.

I touched her arm, feeling her warmth seep through the thin fabric. “Then make it your choice.”

She searched my eyes. “Okay,” she said quietly.

Relief filled me at her reasonability. At least that distinguished her from my late wife. She surprised me when she headed to the bedroom without prompting. I followed a couple of steps behind her. For the first time, I allowed myself to see her as a woman—something I’d avoided at all costs until now but was a necessity for tonight.

The dress accentuated her narrow waist and the beautiful curve of her hips and butt. Arriving in the bedroom, Giulia stopped and glanced over her shoulder. Despite her obvious nerves, she smiled before she set her purse down on the bench in front of the king-sized bed. Her eyes rested on it for a moment, her blush deepening, then she cleared her throat.

I moved closer to her. Her strawberry scent wafted into my nose, making me wonder if she’d taste just as sweet as her choice in perfume suggested. I took in the intricate lace of her long-sleeved bodice, lingering on the swell of her breasts.

“I have to cut you out of your dress,” I said as I unsheathed my knife from the holster at my chest. Another tradition we couldn’t evade.

She regarded the blade with a small frown before she nodded. Turning around, she tilted her head to the side so her hair wasn’t covering the lace top of her back. Her throat was long and elegant, perfectly unblemished,

and I had to resist the urge to press my mouth to it and mark her as mine. Sparing her had appeared easier when we hadn't been married yet. That I had ever considered it an option seemed ludicrous now. She shifted her face and peered up at me through long lashes, nerves in her eyes.

"Everything okay?" she asked quietly.

"Of course," I clipped, my voice harsher than intended because I was annoyed at myself. She averted her eyes and stiffened.

An apology teased the tip of my tongue. It never passed. I slid my finger below the lace to lift it off her skin. Goose bumps pimpled every inch of her body when I touched her soft skin. I brought the knife down and cut through the undoubtedly expensive fabric. The resulting hiss made Giulia jump. I stepped back the moment the knife reached her skirt.

Giulia pulled her dress down slowly, her back to me, and I couldn't look away as she revealed inch over inch of her smooth back. She was topless and only wearing a very skimpy white lace thong. My eyes rested on her perfect ass cheeks, round globes I wanted to sink my teeth into and bury my cock in, a cock that was growing hard watching her.

"Is it okay if I freshen up?"

Her voice tore through my rising arousal. "Of course."

The gruffness in my voice made Giulia risk a glance up at my face. Then she hurried into the bathroom. Terrifying my young wife before I had to claim her was a fucking stupid thing to do.

Loosening my tie, I walked over to the bench and sank down. My wedding ring, similar to my last one, seemed to mock me. I set my tie down beside me, listening to the sound of running water. Giulia would need patience and care. I had never had much of either to begin with. Since the mess with Gaia, even less than before. I propped my arms up on my thighs, trying to reach a state of mind that would allow me to treat my young wife right. I didn't want her to resent me.

The door opened, drawing my attention to it and Giulia. She wore a dark blue silk nightgown that reached her knees and hugged her slender frame. Her hair fell down her shoulders in soft brown curls, freed of the too-cute sunflowers. Giulia didn't move from her spot in the doorframe and nervously smoothed out her bangs then traced the floor with her bare foot.

"What now?"

I met her gaze. She looked to me for guidance, and that was the one thing I had no trouble giving her. I straightened to my full height and held

out my hand. “Come here.”

Taking a visible breath, she moved closer until she stood right in front of me. Without her heels, she only reached my chest. Her strawberry scent was more prominent than before, and even though I’d never been a man for the sweet things in life, I suddenly craved it.

I reached up and cupped her head. She held her breath. For a moment, I regarded her pretty face before I leaned down and pressed a simple kiss to her mouth to see how she’d react. She stayed still. Running my thumb over her cheekbone, I repeated the motion. She softened against me.

“Why are you still wearing a jacket?” she asked after the third simple kiss.

Pulling back, I shrugged out of my jacket and flung it over the bench. Giulia’s eyes took me in.

“And the vest?”

Stifling a smile, I started unbuttoning the vest. She didn’t act how I’d feared, not how Gaia had acted. The last button gave me trouble, but before my frustration could rise, Giulia pushed my hand away and opened it with her elegant fingers. I dropped the vest to the bench as well.

Giulia let out a small breath. “You look really strong.” She reached up as if to feel my bicep then faltered. I gripped her hand and pressed it against my arm then flexed my bicep.

Giulia let out a small laugh, and my own lips twitched. She peered up then darted her gaze behind me. Taking her hand again, I led her closer to the bed.

“Lie down.”

She reclined on the bed, becoming visibly tenser. I pushed off my shoes then stretched out beside her, still almost completely dressed. Gripping her hip, I dragged her closer to me and leaned over her.

A hint of nerves crossed her beautiful face. I focused on her body, not her face, and pressed a kiss to her neck. She was still, holding her breath. Not a great reaction but not too bad. I pressed another kiss to the spot right below her ear, and she surprised me by twitching and letting out a giggle.

A teenage girl giggle. I paused then raised my eyes. She bit her lower lip, her expression caught between embarrassment and an uncertain smile. She looked like such a fucking girl. Of age, my ass. She was legal, but her antics, her reaction, her expression… they weren’t those of a grown woman but of a girl on her way to becoming a woman.

I pushed up, stifling a sigh.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “I didn’t mean to laugh. I’m ticklish.”

She regarded me with uncertainty, her eyes suddenly filled with anxiety. This wasn’t going how I hoped it would. The makeup and elegant dress had made her look older. Now, without a touch of makeup and dressed in her nightgown, she looked like the teenager that she was.

I did what was necessary. I threatened, tortured, killed, so sleeping with my wife should have been a piece of cake.

I ignored her apology and stood. The faster I got this over with, the better. I removed my shirt, followed by my pants and socks. When I reached for my boxers, I noticed Giulia’s gaze. Her eyes were huge, which made her look even younger and more innocent, and she stared at me in a mix of fascination and fear.

I released my waistband, deciding it was better if I kept my cock covered for now. If she let out a terrified shriek upon seeing it, I’d tell Luca to screw himself on the fucking sheets and then my blood would definitely tinge them red.

Perched on the edge of the bed, I reached for her knee, touching it lightly.

She twitched again and bit her lip, trying to hold in another giggle.

“I’m fairly sure I know one place where you’re not ticklish,” I said sardonically.

She pursed her lips. “You can’t know…” Her eyes widened. “You mean…” She sucked in a quick breath. At least she understood my comment. If she’d stared at me blankly, I would have lost it.

I knelt on the bed. I wanted to relax her enough to keep her pain to a minimum. My first wife had cried through our first time together, an experience I really didn’t want to repeat.

I pushed up her nightgown enough to reach her panties, and my groin tightened in a familiar way seeing the valley between her thighs. I touched my fingers to her hips, sliding them into the waistband of her underwear.

She was perfectly still, watching me with parted lips and that damn innocence that was going to kill me. “Can I take them off?”

It was a rhetorical question—we both knew what was expected.

“What if I say no? Would it matter?” she asked with a hint of insolence.

“Would it make you feel better if I continued despite your saying no? It certainly won’t help me.”

“I doubt you’d care. It certainly won’t hurt you as much as me.”

Anger surged through me. I moved over her, bracing myself beside her shoulders. Her hands came up as if to ward me off, soft palms pressing against my chest. Her eyes widened, and she darted them to my pecs, her fingers shaking against me.

“Listen up. You’re right, you’ll be the one who’ll experience discomfort, but I can guarantee you that being bratty about it doesn’t help. If you work with me, it’ll be better.”

“It’s not just the pain. Until this moment, men were allowed to kiss my hand or dance with me at social gatherings, nothing more. And now you’re here, over me, half naked, and I’m half naked, and soon we’ll both be naked, and you’re going to…” She sucked in a deep breath.

“I know,” I said quietly. “Don’t start to cry.”

She drew her lower lip between her teeth. After a moment, she said firmly. “I won’t cry.” Then she peered up at me. “Why do you care? You’ve seen worse than someone crying.”

I had. Far worse, and I hadn’t given a shit. But Giulia was young, too young, and my wife, the woman who was supposed to become a mother to my children. Fuck. This was such a mess.

She was biting her lip, not looking at me, but at something only she could see.

“Giulia,” I murmured, and her gaze settled on me. “Help me with this.”

She looked at me with those big eyes and nodded slowly.

Relief filled me. Bringing my head down, I kissed her lips lightly. Then again. At the third kiss, Giulia’s lips moved hesitantly against mine, and I sucked her lovely plump lower lip into my mouth. She made the smallest sound and closed her eyes. My tongue stroked her open and dipped in, tasting my wife for the first time. Hell, so unbelievably sweet it was going to kill me. Not stopping the kiss, I rested my palm on her ribcage.

Her eyes shot open, and she flinched slightly. I drew back from her mouth, watching her as I stroked my palm down her side then back up—a soft touch, the promise that I’d treat her with care. “Will you let me undress you?”

Again, the silent nod. I sat back on my haunches and helped Giulia into a sitting position. Then I hooked my fingers under the hem of her nightgown and dragged it upward. She lifted her arms so I could pull it over her head. I discarded the flimsy thing on the floor and turned my attention

back to Giulia. Her arms were loosely crossed over her chest. Biting her lip in that cute way, she lowered them slowly, giving me a perfect view of her breasts.

God, she was lovely.

I reached for her and gently ran my knuckles down the valley between those pretty breasts. Giulia twitched, nose crinkling, holding back one of those giggles. Her cheeks turned red. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” I said in a slightly lower voice. I’d rather she giggled than cried, and right now she thankfully didn’t appear as if she was close to tears.

“You’re very beautiful,” I told her. Because it was the truth and because I didn’t want her to be self-conscious. It would only make her tense more.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I murmured as I traced the outside of her breast with my knuckles. Her nipples hardened, and the blush on her cheeks spread all over her face. I was glad that I hadn’t listened to my conscience and asked Luca to cancel the wedding because she was too young for me. Right this moment I knew she’d be mine forever.

I swiped my thumb over her nipple, and Giulia sucked in a small breath. I repeated the motion, stifling a groan at the feel of her perfect nub.

“Do you like this?”

“Yes. It feels good.”

I ran my hand down to her panties. “Lie back.” She did and her body became visibly tenser. The muscles in her belly flexed, and she held her breath. “This is no reason to become tense. I’ll only pull down your panties.”

Slowly, I dragged them down and relief, followed by desire, flooded me. Most women were waxed completely for the wedding night, and while I enjoyed that, with Giulia it would have only put emphasis on her age. Luckily, she had a small triangle of dark brown hair on her mound.

“I know it’s not what’s tradition, but I didn’t want to—”

“It’s perfect,” I rasped.

She regarded me shyly, her legs pressed together. I allowed myself to admire her then bent down and pressed a kiss to her belly as I drew in a deep breath, catching another whiff of the strawberry lotion she must have applied earlier. Sweet all over, my wife.

“Part your legs for me.”

“Why?”

I peered up, stifling my impatience at her stubbornness when I saw the anxiety on her pretty face. “Giulia.”

She parted her legs, but only just, and I had to nudge them a bit wider apart so I could climb between them and stretch out. Then I took in my wife’s pussy. Fuck. My desire returned full force. I leaned forward, but Giulia tensed and her hand shot out, pressing against my forehead, stopping me. For a moment I was sure I’d start laughing. This situation was too much even for my control.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to help you relax.”

She glanced down at me. “But… why?”

“Because most women enjoy this very much. I think you might too.”

Her nose wrinkled as if I was going to do something nasty. “So you’re going to… kiss me down there?”

I chuckled, couldn’t help myself. “Yes, I’m going to kiss you down there, and lick you and suck you, and hopefully you’ll enjoy it as much as I will.”

Her eyebrows shot up. I lowered my head to her thigh, stifling another chuckle. Her skin was soft against my stubbled cheek, and my eyes found her perfect pussy once more. I wrapped my fingers around her hand and pulled it away from my forehead.

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

I propped myself up and leaned close. Giulia held her breath, her body becoming so tight I was sure she’d snap in two at any moment. My lips brushed her velvety folds, and she twitched, sucking in a sharp breath.

My gaze darted up to her. “Did that tickle?” I rasped.

Giulia’s eyes were squeezed shut, and she was very still. “No.”

I kissed the same spot, applying a bit more pressure. Her pussy smelled even sweeter and absolutely irresistible. Again, a sharp intake of breath. I planted kiss after kiss all over her pussy, giving her time to get used to my attention. She didn’t respond in any way except for her ragged breathing. I wasn’t sure if she enjoyed it. I brushed my palm along her inner thigh and applied light pressure, wanting to part her for me so I had better access, but she resisted. My frustration spiked once more, but I shoved it down. Eighteen. Young and inexperienced.

“Giulia, let me.”

I could feel her legs softening, and finally, I parted her all the way. The hint of arousal coated her opening and relief filled me. I dipped my head and ran my tongue along her sensitive folds. Giulia's hand shot out again, but this time she didn't shove; she only held on to my head, her fingers shaking. I hovered above her and used the tip of my tongue to circle her clit. She gasped, fingers twitching. I took my time experimenting to figure out what she enjoyed, but she was very quiet and tense, which made it difficult. Her clit definitely worked when I swiped my tongue over it. Her breathing deepened and her body responded to my ministration, but after fifteen minutes, it became quite clear that she was too nervous to come. I kissed her inner thigh.

"Do you think you can come?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry." Acute embarrassment showed on her face.

"Don't be. It takes time." I paused, knowing what would have to happen next. "Are you ready?"

I knew she wasn't, and not because she hadn't come. She was wet, definitely as wet as I'd get her tonight given the circumstances. Giulia swallowed then gave a small nod.

I got off the bed and slid out of my boxers. My cock was definitely ready. Smelling, tasting, seeing her had sent a flood of blood right to it.

"Oh shit," Giulia whispered.

My eyebrows shot up and for a second right there, I was sure I'd start roaring with laughter. I stifled the impulse and knelt on the bed. "You're going to stretch."

Her expression remained doubtful and worse… fearful. Fuck it. We had to get it over with. If she started worrying about all the ways this would hurt, she'd only grow more tense.

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SEVEN

Cassio

“Do you take the pill?” I asked. It wasn’t the most romantic thing to say in a situation like this, but before today, I couldn’t bring myself to ask my teenage wife that question.

A quick nod.

I climbed on top of her and guided my cock to her opening, but she shrank back. I wanted to roar in frustration. “Giulia,” I said imploringly.

“Can you hold me?”

My heart skipped a fucking beat. I nodded and lowered myself to my elbows then wedged one arm under my wife’s shoulder blades and hugged her to my chest. “Like this?” I murmured.

Her face was inches from mine, and she looked up at me, seeking my help, my protection, my closeness. I kissed the corner of her mouth then her lower and upper lip as I shifted my hips so my tip nudged her entrance. She held her breath. I stroked her bangs from her sweaty forehead.

“Breathe out.”

She did, and I pushed into her about an inch.

Her face flashed with discomfort, and she gripped my bicep.

“If it’s too much, you tell me, and we’ll figure something out,” I heard myself say, and I wanted to kick myself, but she gave me a grateful small smile, and I could feel her walls loosen very slightly. Slowly, I slid deeper into her, even when she squeezed her eyes shut and exhaled. She got very tight, and I knew this part would hurt the most. Kissing her temple, I thrust

forward and slid all the way in. She flinched under me and gasped, her breathing ragged.

I shuddered out a breath, trying to stay still, and pretty sure her walls were going to milk my cock any second now. Fuck, she was tight. “Giulia? How are you?”

She looked at me. “Okay,” she said shakily. “It’s strange… feeling you inside of me. Really full.”

I smiled at her analysis.

“I’m talking nonsense, aren’t I?”

I shook my head and stroked her cheek then began to move, small shallow thrusts which grew gradually harder. She tensed every time, but she didn’t cry, didn’t whimper or sob, and I was grateful for that. It didn’t take long for me to reach my tipping point, and I didn’t bother holding back, knowing she’d be glad when it was over.

My body tightened, my balls expanding, and then I shot my cum into her. She sucked in her breath, and I stilled above her. Then I pressed my forehead into the pillow beside her head. She was very still under me, and I listened for a sob, crying, and again relief filled me when I heard neither. I pulled out very slowly and rolled off her but stayed close. She turned on her side, facing me.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

I searched her flushed face. “What for?” It couldn’t be for giving her an orgasm because I definitely hadn’t, but I would soon. Many of them.

“For being patient and careful.”

I frowned. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Gaia had enjoyed playing the guilt card, had cried often to make me feel bad even when I’d tried to do everything to be decent.

“Women talk. Some men don’t because it gives them a feeling of dominance, others because they enjoy hurting, and some just want to make sure the blood stain is big so they can impress…”

Surprise filled me at her words. She sounded less like a girl then. “I don’t need to show my dominance by hurting you during sex. I’m Underboss, I rule over people on a daily basis. And while I enjoy hurting when it’s called for, I don’t enjoy hurting women or children. As for the last reason, maybe some men think a big blood stain makes the audience believe they have a huge dick, when in truth it only shows that they have no clue how to work that dick.”

Giulia laughed. Then her smile became teasing. “Do you?”

A low laugh rumbled in my chest. “Know how to work my dick?”

She blushed but nodded.

“I think I do. I know today wasn’t pleasurable for you, but soon it will be.”

She tilted her head in consideration. “Okay.”

I glanced down the length of me. My cock was smeared with blood. I sat up then held out my hand to Giulia. “Can you sit up for a moment?”

With a small frown, she did. “Why?” Then her eyes widened and her gaze darted down her body. “Oh.”

“Just wait a couple of seconds.”

Her nose wrinkled. “That’s kind of disgusting.”

“I know. But it’s tradition.” I brushed her hair from her face again, and Giulia regarded me curiously. Her eyes were a startling blue like a clear summer sky and her nose had the slightest upward tip, which gave her a coy look.

“Do you find me pretty?” she asked, drawing in that plump lower lip between her teeth.

“Yes, I do.” My thumb stroked along the back of her hand—which I hadn’t even realized I was still holding.

“Oh,” she said. “I wasn’t sure. You didn’t act as if you cared much.”

It was a good thing that I’d perfected my poker face over the years and a necessary evil in my line of work. “I did and *do* find you very attractive.”

“Hmm. Usually I’m good at telling those things. Most men are really obvious about their interest. They get that intense look as if they want to devour you.”

Something angry and dark curled in my chest. “Did it happen often… that men looked at you like that? As if they wanted to devour you?” Despite my best intention, my voice held an edge it hadn’t before.

Giulia tilted her head, considering me in that quiet way of hers. “Occasionally. Sometimes men who visited my father, sometimes strangers when I was out with my bodyguards. It’s not like anyone ever approached me.”

“Good,” I growled.

Her eyebrows darted up. “Are you jealous?”

“Possessive. I don’t share well. Or at all.”

She laughed.

“That’s funny to you? I’m dead serious.”

She rolled her eyes. *Rolled. Her. Eyes.* I couldn’t even remember the last time someone had dared roll their eyes at me.

“You get jealous over men watching me from afar, knowing full well that you gave me my first kiss in church today? You never had to share me, nor will you.”

“Have you ever given a man that look?” I questioned.

“No,” she said without hesitation.

“A sheltered upbringing doesn’t make you blind.”

She pursed her lips. “I never looked at men long enough to make up my mind about them. It didn’t seem wise, considering I wasn’t going to be the one choosing my husband.”

That was true. She had no say in the matter.

Cassio swung his legs out of bed. “I’m going to clean up.”

My eyes raked over his muscled body, mesmerized by the hard planes, the ridges of his six-pack, and the narrow V of his hips. I was attracted to his body, which was a relief. My gaze dipped even lower, and the blood on his penis drove heat into my head. I looked away. I had been staring too long anyway. Looking down at myself, I cringed at the sight of my smeared inner thighs—a disgusting mix of blood and sperm. I slid out of bed, taking in the mess on the linens A small mortified sound slipped out of me.

“Are you all right?” Cassio rumbled somewhere behind me.

I turned, grimacing. “Do we really have to show these sheets?”

“That was the point of us sleeping together.”

Ouch. “So, you only slept with me because of the presentation of the sheets?”

Now that we were married, I wanted Cassio to be attracted to me. It seemed a horrible fate to spend your life with someone who couldn't bear touching you. I definitely enjoyed the sight of his body. His touch was still unfamiliar and sex had been painful, but it hadn't been the ordeal my mother and a few of my aunts had made it out to be. I could imagine enjoying it very much, especially Cassio's mouth between my legs.

Cassio regarded me strangely, as if I was an unknown creature. Then he shook his head with a chuckle. "I'm a man."

I headed toward him, also in need of a shower. I felt sticky and sore between my legs. "Is that a reply?" I asked curiously.

Cassio stepped into the bathroom, and I followed him. His eyes traveled over my body, sending an unfamiliar shiver down my back. Now that he'd seen me naked, I didn't really see the point in covering myself, and he didn't look as if he minded. Quite the contrary.

I picked up my pace when I felt something trickling out of me and practically leaped inside the shower. Sighing, I relaxed, glad to have avoided a mess.

"You can shower first," Cassio said.

"We can shower together." I flushed. "I mean, why waste water? There's enough room for both of us."

The corners of Cassio's mouth twitched. "Save water, right?" He stepped into the shower. With him inside, there wasn't as much room as I'd thought, and suddenly the realization set in that despite what had happened, we were still very much strangers. I focused on the shower gel, trying to ignore Cassio's presence as I soaped up my body. It was impossible. Cassio was everywhere. His heat singed my back. His manly scent still clung to me, overpowering the shower gel.

He didn't say anything, only cleaned himself. From the corner of my eye, I saw him rub his cock clean of my blood. Soon the water at our feet was a soft pink. As I cleaned myself between my legs, I winced at how tender and sore I felt.

"It should be better in a couple of days," he said.

I turned halfway so I could look at his face but wouldn't bump into him —which didn't even make sense considering we'd been much closer only a few minutes before. "That long? I thought I'd be fine tomorrow."

The shadow of the past crossed his face, his ocean eyes becoming tumultuous. What had happened between his wife and him? "We'll see,"

was all he said, and then he turned off the water. He reached for a towel and handed it to me before he gripped one for himself. He stepped out of the shower and dried himself.

I watched him as I wrapped the towel around me. Physically, we'd been as close as two people could get, but emotionally we were worlds apart. We'd share the bed again—because I'd seen the desire in Cassio's gaze and because I wanted to. On an emotional level, however, getting closer to my husband would be difficult, I could tell already.

He moved to the washbasin and brushed his teeth. Watching him doing that felt more intimate than being naked in front of him. His expression was guarded. Only briefly during sex it had been anything else. I slinked out of the bathroom, giving him privacy. I'd already gone through my evening routine. I'd mostly managed to keep my hair dry during our shower and didn't want to blow-dry it with him in the room. How could all these mundane activities feel too personal after what we'd just done?

Dropping the towel on the bench, I grabbed my nightgown from the floor and pulled it over my head. Trying to ignore the stain on the sheet, and still seeing it, because I simply couldn't *not* see it, I slipped under the covers.

I'd been tired before. I wasn't now. My body still hummed with adrenaline. When Cassio emerged ten minutes later in low-cut black pajama bottoms, my eyes traveled over him. Many men gained weight once they were married, not enough to be frowned upon by their Capo, but enough to cover up whatever muscles they'd worked hard for in their younger years. Cassio hadn't. Every inch of him was pure muscle. Nothing soft about this man—not his body, expression, or eyes. If he noticed my silent scrutiny, he didn't comment. Instead, he got into bed but left enough room to fit another person between us.

Weren't we going to snuggle against each other? It was something I'd wished for from a marriage.

In the last few years, snuggles had been absent from my life. I wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend, who might have given them to me, and I was too old to seek that kind of closeness with my father. My mother had never been the type to show her affection on a physical level to begin with.

I'd hoped that marriage would open the door to affection that went beyond sex. I wanted to be held and cuddled. Maybe I had been foolish to think Cassio was someone who would be up for that.

Cassio twisted his head to me, but remained on his back. “What is it? You don’t have to be scared of me seeking you out again. We fulfilled our duty.”

Duty.

Honor. Duty. I’d lost count of the number of times I’d heard those two words in my life.

“That’s not it,” I whispered. “I just… I…”

Cassio’s dark brows drew together. “I’m not a mind reader, Giulia, and I don’t have the patience to guess your thoughts.”

His voice was rough.

Tears stung in my eyes at his rebuff.

He let out a small sigh, pushed up on his elbow, and peered down at me. “Are you in pain? Did I hurt you more than I thought?”

Of course, he’d think it had to be something physical bothering me.

“Giulia?” His strong hand touched my bare shoulder, and I shuddered under the gentle touch. Misunderstanding my reaction, he pulled his hand away, but I grasped it.

“Can we—” I couldn’t ask a man like Cassio to snuggle. Instead, I moved closer until I could sense his warmth, my fingers still clutching his hand. “Be close like this for a little while?”

For a moment, he didn’t react, only regarded me with those ocean-blue eyes. Then, without a word, he lowered himself to his back, but this time he raised his arm, opening up a spot for me. I slid even closer until I was pressed up to him, my face on his strong chest, one of my legs thrown over his muscled thigh. He smelled good, so good. Strong, warm, and manly. I held my hands awkwardly pressed against my breasts, unsure where to put them. Cassio curled his arm around my body, loosely at first, but then more tightly when I let out a small sigh. Gathering my courage, I rested one hand on his chest. Soon my fingers grew restless—*curious*.

Until this day I hadn’t been allowed to touch a man, to discover his body. I idly traced the smattering of hair on his pecs, realizing that I liked the feel of it. In the media I’d only ever seen guys with smooth chests and tried to imagine how they would feel. Cassio was all man, strong and with body hair. Not that he was overly hairy… he wasn’t. My fingers glided lower, over the ridges of his stomach, following the trail of hair until I bumped against his waistband.

Cassio gripped my hand. “Giulia.” It was low, dark and almost pained. He pulled back, dipped his head at the same time as I tipped mine up. He scanned my face.

What had I done wrong? Didn’t he like to be touched like that?

I felt the groan more than I heard it. It was on the verge of a tortured laugh. I blinked, trying to figure out my husband. He lifted my hand and firmly pressed it, palm flat, against his sternum. “It stays there.”

He lowered his head back to the pillow then extinguished the lights.

“I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable. I didn’t mean to make you feel that way.”

Cassio grunted, almost a chuckle. “I’m not uncomfortable, and I know that you don’t mean to make me feel the way I feel. That *is* the problem. Now sleep.” The last was an order.

I gave up trying to figure out the meaning of his words. I wasn’t a mind reader either. Yawning, I settled more firmly against him and closed my eyes. Silence settled over us and my breathing eventually slowed as tiredness overcame me.

Cassio tensed. “Are you going to fall asleep like that?”

“You wanted me to sleep.”

“I do. On your side, not in my arm.”

My stomach dropped. This shouldn’t have hurt as much as it did. Cassio was my husband, but only by name. I didn’t have strong feelings for him—or even knew him at all. Not saying anything from fear of giving away more than I intended, I scrambled as far away from him as I could.

My side of the bed was cold, not warm like Cassio’s. I swallowed my hurt and my longing, trying to breathe evenly. Still, tears fell from my eyes.

I could make out the outline of Cassio’s head and knew he was watching me. The knowledge that the dark hid my expression from him gave me little consolation because I had a feeling he knew I was crying from the way my breathing had sounded.

“I can’t sleep with someone close to me. Anyone,” he murmured.

I nodded, because words were out of the question.

“I guess it’s fitting that my second wedding night ends the same way my first did—with my crying wife in bed beside me.”

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EIGHT

Cassio

I wasn’t a fan of physical contact at night and had often not even shared the bed with my deceased wife. Not that she would have ever dreamed of wanting to have me close at night. She never bothered to hide her reluctance to have me near her, least of all when we slept together—unless there was something that she wanted from me.

Giulia had asked for my closeness and I’d denied her.

The early morning light illuminated her puffy face. Her lashes stuck to her skin with dried tears. She was close, had moved closer in sleep until we were almost touching. I felt the unreasonable desire to touch her—and not in a sexual way. Propped up on my elbow, I watched her peaceful sleep. As with many nights before, Gaia’s blood-covered body had haunted my dreams. I hardly ever dreamed about the people I’d killed, and yet my dead wife still filled my nights.

Giulia stirred, lips parting in a soft sigh. I pushed myself up and swung my legs out of bed, turning my back to her.

The bed shifted. I threw a glance over my shoulder at Giulia who was sitting up, rubbing her face framed by messy hair. Noticing my attention, her eyes met mine. She smiled hesitantly. The early morning light wasn’t kind to me because Giulia looked absolutely lovely in a very teenage girl way.

Damn it all.

I stood. “We need to get ready. The women will retrieve the sheets soon.”

Giulia took my watch from the nightstand. “It’s only eight. Do you really think they’ll disturb us this early after our wedding night?”

They probably wouldn’t, but I had no intention to waste time in bed. I had scheduled several meetings throughout the day, the most important with Luca for lunch. I needed to use the opportunity of having him in town. I grabbed my phone from the nightstand and sent Mia a message that they could pick up the sheets in thirty minutes. Her nosy reply came immediately.

Won’t you even sleep in after your wedding night?

Stay out of my business was all I wrote back.

I put the phone back down, ignoring Giulia’s appraisal. I’d caught her watching me last night and now this morning. Her reaction surprised me. Of course, it was a pleasant surprise that she seemed attracted to my body and not appalled like Gaia.

“Mia and the others will come by in thirty minutes. Do you want to shower first? I can shave in the meantime.”

Giulia bit her lip, looking away before she nodded. “All right.” She shoved the covers off and stood. My eyes took her in, and for a moment I considered telling Mia that they could wait after all. Giulia was impossibly beautiful, and the idea to bury myself in her tight pussy once more was far too enticing, but the bloodstain on the sheets reminded me why that wasn’t going to happen.

Fifteen minutes later Giulia was showered and dressed, and I headed toward the shower. She’d chosen one of the dresses I’d sent to her parents, an elegant long-sleeved knee-length red piece that hugged Giulia’s slender body. It still didn’t make her look close to my age, but at least not quite the teenager she was.

“Should I cover my puffy eyes with makeup or do you want people to know I cried?”

I paused, one foot inside the shower. Turning back to my wife hovering in the doorway to the bedroom, I frowned. “I didn’t want you to cry. Why would I want people to know you did?”

She gave a small shrug, searching my face. “I thought maybe you’d want people to think you hurt me enough to make me cry.”

I considered it. The men downstairs would draw the wrong conclusions and fear me for it. It wasn't a decent thing to consider, but the men downstairs weren't decent, and I wasn't either. "I'm feared as it is… and for good reason. I don't want my sisters on my back like they'll undoubtedly be if they see that you cried, so cover it up with makeup."

She regarded me a moment longer, and I couldn't tell why. It was unnerving.

"Okay. I don't want to keep you from showering. I know how busy you are today."

The hint of disapproval rang in her voice. She hadn't reacted when I told her I was going to spend the day in business meetings until we'd head to my mansion and children in the late afternoon. "I work a lot, Giulia, and I won't explain myself to you. As a woman, your only job is to raise my children, but I can't afford that luxury."

Anger flared in her eyes, but she turned and left.

I wasn't in the mood to consider her teenage antics. She'd better get rid of them soon.

When I emerged fully dressed in another dark three-piece suit fifteen minutes later, I found Giulia on the sofa in the living room of our suite, typing on her phone. She was smiling softly. I stalked over to her. "Who are you talking to?"

Her head shot up, her brows drawing together. "Excuse me?"

"Who are you talking to?"

Anxiety crossed her face, but I didn't care if she was bothered by me towering over her. "Who?" I growled.

"Your sister Mia."

I took the phone and Giulia released it without a protest.

I apologize for my brother's rudeness because I know he won't ever do it. I'd say it's because he's a man, but his dickheadedness has nothing to do with the Y-chromosome.

Giulia stood. "I told you the truth."

I scanned the previous messages to see what Giulia had told my sister, but she'd only written that she still had to get used to me after Mia had asked if she was all right.

Giulia shook her head then sighed. "Trust is the base of a marriage."

"How would you know?" Was she really trying to tell me something about relationships? "I think I know more about the workings of a marriage

than you, girl."

Her expression flashed with hurt. "I wonder if Gaia would agree." She snapped her lips shut, her eyes growing wide.

Fury burst through me the same time a knock sounded. Swallowing my anger, I headed for the door, glad for the distance this put between Giulia and myself. I ripped open the door, feeling my pulse pound in my temples.

Mia's smile fell when she spotted me. Her eyes darted to something behind me. "Everything okay?" she whispered.

I opened the door wide. Behind Mia, Ilaria, Giulia's mother, Aria, and other women waited for the ceremonial retrieval of the sheets. "Go in. Grab the sheets. I don't have all morning."

"Rude as usual," Ilaria said as she walked past me. Mia hesitated, which was just as well. I pulled her to the side. "I saw what you wrote my wife."

Mia huffed. "Are you spying on her?"

"You will stay out of my marriage, Mia. I'll only say this once. Remember your place. And most of all, don't talk to Giulia about Gaia, understood?"

She shook my grip off, then nodded. "Of course."

Giulia smiled at the women who gave her compassionate looks. I walked over to my young wife before one of the women, especially Mia, could involve her in a nosy conversation.

Giulia touched my forearm lightly. "I'm sorry for mentioning your late wife, Cassio. I didn't mean to upset you."

Surprise filled me. Her eyes and expression were earnest.

I gave a curt nod and put my hand on her lower back. "Come on. Let's head down to the banquet room where breakfast will be served."

"Shouldn't we wait for them to be done?" She nodded toward the bedroom door. The women's voices were a low buzz of gossip.

"I don't need to see this."

She smiled sheepishly. "You are right."

I hesitated, on the verge of saying more, then I steered Giulia out of our suite. Our elevator ride passed in silence, but Giulia's tension was palpable.

"The worst is over," I said.

Her head shot up and her lips twitched. "Are you talking about our wedding night?"

I tilted my head, considering her. She was obviously fighting amusement. "You don't have to pretend the night didn't harbor great fears

for you. I felt your trembling."

"It scared me, true. But it's over and it wasn't as unpleasant as I'd thought it would be."

My eyebrows shot up, not sure what to make of my wife's honesty. Even though we were married, the unguarded way she spoke to me took getting used to. "That's good, I suppose."

She leaned into me with a small laugh. "Yeah, I suppose so too."

The elevator doors opened, cutting our strange conversation short. I led Giulia toward the biggest banquet room, which was already filled with the men of my and Giulia's family, as well as the most important members of the Famiglia.

"Let the meat show begin," Giulia said under her breath.

I squeezed her side in warning even as I had to stifle a smile. "You're now my wife and need to act accordingly. I can't afford to lose face in public."

She tensed. "I know."

I needn't have worried. Giulia had inherited her mother's talent to chat up people, even strangers, but unlike Egidia, she was charming and lovely, wrapping everyone around her finger with ease. Many men watched her in a way that set me on edge, but none dared as much as to shake her hand.

Faro winked at me as he talked to a few of our Captains. I ignored it and turned my attention to the door where my mother and Giulia's mother entered with the sheet between them. They headed to the side of the room and draped the fabric over two chairs.

Giulia let out a tiny choked sound, and her cheeks took on a red hue the moment she spotted them. "This is mortifying."

I peered down. I wasn't embarrassed, but I, too, didn't like to show this glimpse of our private life to the public. With Gaia, I hadn't cared, maybe because I'd been young and eager to impress. "It's a sign of your honor, nothing to be ashamed of."

"And a sign of your ruthlessness, no?" There was a small twitch of her mouth and that surprising twinkle in her eyes as if she'd made a secret joke.

"I suppose it is. Given your age, I should have had qualms. That I didn't is a sign of my nature."

After the first commotion and applause had settled, Giulia and I headed to the table with our closest family as well as Luca and his wife. Giulia's mother immediately hugged her. Father patted my shoulder, searching my

eyes. Whatever he was worried to see, it wouldn’t be present in a room with acquaintances.

Mia hugged me despite my reluctance of public displays of affection. “I really hope you tried to be a decent human being to that girl.”

I wasn’t sure about my abilities to be decent at all. It wasn’t in my nature, but I hadn’t been impatient or rough with Giulia. “Mind your own business.” She narrowed her eyes. I had lost count of the times I’d told her this, but she failed to comply with my wishes.

“Everything all right?” Giulia whispered as we took our seats at the head of the table.

I leaned closer. “My sister worried I wasn’t decent to you.”

“Because of the sheets?” Horror rang in Giulia’s words.

“Because of my nature.”

Giulia tilted her head in that curious way. Her hair smelled like a strawberry field in summer, and the insane urge to press my nose into it rose up inside me. “You were decent.” She touched my hand resting on my thigh with her fingertips. Feeling eyes on me, I turned back to the table. Christian, Felix, and my father watched curiously. My expression tightened.

Cassio obviously felt uncomfortable with any kind of emotional displays in public. He soon talked to Luca and fellow Underbosses, leaving me at the mercy of my nosy mother. Eventually I managed to shake her and my aunts off and hid in a stall in the restrooms.

This was where Mia found me twenty minutes later. “It’s overwhelming, isn’t it?” she said after I came out and we both redid our makeup.

“It is.”

“Are you okay? You can tell me if you aren’t. Cassio is my brother, but I’m a woman first.”

I nodded, remembering Cassio’s words and his reluctance to involve other people in our private life.

“I’m fine, but thank you.”

She gave a small smile. “Don’t let him turn you into something that’s not you. Our world needs girls like you.”

I gave her a quick hug, and unlike her brother, she didn’t mind and hugged me back. I was glad to have her on my side, but I needed to find my place in Cassio’s life by myself. He wouldn’t tolerate anything else.

It was almost eight in the evening when we finally pulled up the driveway to Cassio’s mansion, a magnificent three-story brownstone building with white columns supporting the porch, white window frames, and old crooked trees on the front lawn. Cassio parked in one of the double garages on the left.

He got out and opened the door for me. My stomach hollowed with nerves. This was my home now, and soon I’d meet the children I’d raise. Cassio’s hand found its place on my lower back again as he led me toward the magnificent white front door. Someone from his staff had gathered my belongings in the morning and brought them to the house.

I released a shaky breath when Cassio put the key in the lock. His eyes cut to me. “This is your home.”

I gave him a shaky smile, knowing he meant it. Yet judging by the way he’d handled everything so far, his rules would be the only ones he’d want followed within those walls. I’d have to fight for every bit of power and freedom—he wouldn’t hand over either freely.

He opened the door and motioned for me to get inside. I did, trying to figure out what I was smelling as I scanned the white and gray granite floor. High-pitched barking almost gave me a heart attack, and a small ball of reddish-brown fluff stormed through the hall and latched itself onto Cassio’s trouser leg. Growling, the small dog started to tug at the fabric. I

blinked then bit my lip, stifling laughter. It was too ridiculous a sight not to be amusing.

“Fuck!” Cassio snarled. “Sybil, didn’t I tell you to keep the goddamn dog locked away?”

My smile died. He bent down and tried to grab the dog’s neck, but the tiny thing snapped its teeth and bit his finger. Fury flickered across his face, and he finally managed to grab the dog and lifted it into the air. The dog squeaked once then fell silent and hung in Cassio’s grasp. My husband looked as if he considered putting it down with his gun or strangling it with his strong hands.

I touched his arm, terrified for the helpless animal. “Don’t hurt it.”

Cassio’s eyes snapped to mine, still with the same anger in them, and I dropped my hand but stood my ground.

Steps rang out and a tall dark-haired woman in her early fifties came running then stopped abruptly and cursed in Italian, looking to the floor. She’d stepped in dog poo, which explained what I’d smelled. Her black flats were now covered with it.

“That’s it,” Cassio growled. “Tomorrow this thing is gone.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Moretti. I went into its room to clean and it slipped out. I tried catching it all day, but it’s too fast. And Daniele hid from me again. I don’t know—” She glanced my way and fell silent.

Cassio ignored her and stalked away. I followed hesitantly into a magnificent living room with herringbone parquet, then watched as my husband opened the terrace door and dropped the dog outside before closing the door. The dog peered in through the glass.

“You can’t do that,” I said, horrified.

Sybil gave me a look that conveyed I should keep my mouth shut. Cassio, however, ignored my comment altogether.

“Clean the dog shit,” Cassio ordered Sybil as he moved to a liquor cabinet, poured himself a drink, and sank down on the cognac-colored leather sofa. I couldn’t tear my eyes from the small dog sitting in the November cold with its nose pressed to the window. Sybil scurried away to follow her master’s command.

I stood in the middle of the living room, not sure what to do. One thing was for sure: I wouldn’t let that dog freeze to death outside. Cassio was the master of this house, in our society’s eyes—*my* master.

I walked over to the terrace door.

“Don’t.”

The word, without being said loudly, held absolute authority. Cassio was used to giving orders in every area of his life and expected unwavering obedience.

I didn’t look his way. If I saw his sharp eyes and powerful face, I might lose my courage. That wasn’t going to happen. This was the beginning of a new life, and if I let him trample all over me, I’d be doomed.

“Giulia, *don’t.*” Warning rang in his voice. Or what? He pushed off of the sofa when I opened the door and picked up the shivering ball of fluff. The dog remained quiet as I pressed it to my chest. I could feel matted fur from months of neglect.

Cassio towered over me, barring my way. I tipped my head up to meet his furious gaze. “That thing stays outside.” His eyes were harsh, but I didn’t look away. “I gave you an order.”

An order? “It seems I’m as badly trained as your dog.” Mother’s warning words about insolence rang in my head. It was too late, not that I would have taken anything back.

Cassio’s face flashed with surprise then anger. “Set it back down. I won’t allow you to bring it inside.”

Allow. Order. I was his wife, not his slave. But again, he was Underboss and probably didn’t understand the difference. “If the dog isn’t allowed inside, then I’ll stay outside with it. We can keep each other warm.” I turned to walk over to one of the lounge chairs, but Cassio’s arm shot out, stopping me.

I flinched. Father never hit me. Mother did twice. It wasn’t firsthand experience that had me wince, but I’d seen men hit women and children. My uncles, in particular, were of the violent sort. It happened often in our circles.

Cassio frowned and his fingers gently closed around my elbow. I regarded him curiously. “That flinch was unnecessary, and I don’t want it to happen again, all right?”

“You don’t want me to react that way or I won’t have reason to react that way?”

A ghost of a smile crossed Cassio’s face before the stern look was back. He leaned down so we were at eye level. “You won’t ever have reason to.”

“You sure?” I said it more to annoy him than anything else, but my words were softened by a tiny smile.

“Absolutely.”

“Good.”

His expression conveyed confusion. Was I that much of an enigma to him? “Now put the dog down.”

My smile widened. “No.”

He looked incredulous. Releasing my elbow, he cupped my chin between his thumb and forefinger and brought our faces even closer. This time I didn’t flinch, and I could see that it pleased him. “I gave you an order. I’m your husband and my word is law.”

“I know. And if you insist that the dog stays outside, I will too.”

Cassio narrowed his eyes. His breath held the hint of the spicy liquor, and I felt the crazy urge to taste it on his lips. “Do you really think I believe you’ll spend the night in the cold for a dog?”

I stared back stubbornly.

He barked out a laugh. “I think you might actually do it. Your parents didn’t mention your stubborn streak when they bartered you away.”

“They were too eager marrying me off to the cruelest Underboss of the Famiglia,” I muttered.

“The cruelest Underboss, hmm? That’s what they call me?”

“They did, and other people do too.”

“Why would your parents tell you something like that about your future husband?”

“To get me in line. My mother worried you might beat me to death if I’m insolent.”

Something on Cassio’s face shifted, a shadow of the past. “They shouldn’t have scared you before our wedding.”

“Is it a lie, then?” I whispered. For some reason his mouth appeared even closer than before.

“There’s no scale to judge someone’s cruelness.”

“That means it’s the truth.” He didn’t contradict me. I couldn’t read the look on his face. Acting on impulse, I leaned forward and brushed my lips across his then darted my tongue out, tasting the liquor clinging to his mouth. Smoky and sweet.

Cassio stiffened, but the look on his face became even more intense than before. “What was that?” His voice was a low rasp that I could feel everywhere.

“A kiss?” I didn’t have much experience, but I doubted anyone could mess up a simple kiss.

“Are you trying to influence me with your body?”

My eyes grew wide. “*No.* I could smell the liquor on your breath, and I was curious how it tastes.”

Cassio chuckled. “You are a strange girl.” His mouth twisted. “*Woman*.”

He looked down at the dog in my arms. It was snuggled against me peacefully. Without a word, Cassio turned around and returned to his glass of whisky on the table. I stepped inside and closed the door. Stroking the dog, I followed my husband.

“What’s its name?”

“Loulou,” Cassio said, a strange note to his voice. I stopped beside him.

“Can I have a sip of your whisky?”

Cassio’s eyes bored into me. “You’ve never had whisky before?”

“No. My father didn’t allow me to drink alcohol. I had my first glass at our wedding.”

“Many firsts for one day.” A small shiver passed down my spine at the contemplative growl. “You aren’t old enough for hard liquor.”

My lips parted in indignation. Was he serious?

He downed the remains of his drink, and before I could say something snarky, he cupped the back of my head and pressed his lips to mine. Gently at first, his eyes searching mine. I grasped his bicep and stood on my tiptoes —his permission. Then he really kissed me, his tongue stroking mine, discovering my mouth. The taste of whisky swirled in my mouth, intoxicating—not as much as the kiss though. God, his kiss set me aflame.

When he pulled back, I was dazed. Only Loulou squirming in my other arm brought me back to reality.

Cassio glanced over my head. “What is it, Sybil?”

I whirled around. Sybil hovered in the doorway, wringing her hands and looking anywhere but at me. She must have caught us kissing, and even though we hadn’t done anything indecent or forbidden, considering that we were married, acute embarrassment washed over me.

“The children are asleep, and I cleaned up. Is there anything else you need from me?”

“No, you can go.”

His clipped voice rubbed me the wrong way. Even if Sybil was working for him, that didn’t mean he had to sound like a drill sergeant. Sybil nodded

and with a fleeting smile at me, she left.

“Can I see your children?”

Cassio’s brows furrowed. “The dog stays here, and we have to be quiet. I don’t want them to wake.”

“Where should I put Loulou?”

“We lock it in a room because the thing can’t behave itself.”

I pressed my lips together, following Cassio as he led me into the lobby and motioned at a door.

I pushed it open and my heart clenched. It must have been a storage room before, judging by the small window and shelves lining the walls. A torn apart basket, a litter box, and two empty bowls were the only indication that a dog lived here. There were no toys. I picked up one of the bowls and handed it to Cassio. “Can you fill it with water?”

Cassio regarded the bowl, then me.

“Please.” Loulou’s living arrangements had to change, and they would change, but today was only my first day. I’d have to be clever about my battle against my husband. He took the bowl and disappeared. I headed over to the torn apart basket and set Loulou down. She curled into herself. She must have let out her frustration on her basket if its destroyed state was an indication. No wonder considering she’d probably spent most of her days alone in this room. What had happened in this house? I stroked her head when Cassio walked back in with the water bowl. He set it down, and the moment he stepped back, Loulou trotted over to it and drank.

I straightened. I couldn’t hold back anymore. “How long has she been locked inside this room?”

Cassio’s expression tightened. “The dog’s out of control. I won’t have it shit and pee everywhere, not to mention snap at my children and everyone else.”

“How can you expect Loulou to behave if nobody takes care of her? She isn’t a machine, she’s a living being, and from what I see she hasn’t been treated the way she was supposed to. If you have an animal, you have to take care of it and not treat it like a thing you can put in a corner and take out when you feel like it.”

“I didn’t want the dog! Gaia did, and then I was left to deal with it like everything else.” He snapped his mouth shut as if he’d said more than he wanted, breathing harshly. Loulou hid in her basket at his outburst.

I stood my ground. “Then why didn’t you give Loulou to people who want her?” I kept my voice calm. Meeting Cassio’s anger with my own seemed like an unwise choice.

Cassio shook his head. “Let’s go upstairs. I have a busy day tomorrow.”

“Why?” I touched his forearm.

“Because Daniele lost his mother. He doesn’t need to lose this too!”

“I thought Loulou snaps at him.”

“She does,” Cassio said. “And she’s not allowed near him.”

“Then why—”

“Enough.” Cassio’s voice could have cut steel. He nodded toward the door. I walked out of the small room. Cassio closed it, locking Loulou in once more.

“Does Sybil walk her?”

Cassio gritted his teeth as he led me up the stairs. “No. It’s got that cat box in the room.”

“It needs to be walked. It’s not a cat.”

Cassio sent me a look that made it clear he expected me to shut up right this moment.

“I’ll walk it, then. You have a leash, right?”

He stopped on the second-floor landing, a vein in his temple throbbing. “You don’t have time to walk the dog. You’ve got my kids to take care of.”

His kids. He made it sound like I was his nanny—with the added bonus of sleeping with him.

“Kids need fresh air too.”

He gave me a condescending look as if I was a delusional child in need of reprimand. He didn’t think I’d be able to handle his children, much less a dog on top of it.

Maybe he was right, but one of us had to try. I had a feeling that no matter how in control of his soldiers, his city, and his life Cassio seemed, his own home and his family had slipped out of his hands. He was incapable of fixing it; maybe he’d even given up hope that it could be fixed. And now here I was, without the hint of knowledge about dogs or kids that went beyond what I’d read in books, supposed to deal with all this.

In the months since our engagement, I’d dreaded our wedding night. Now it seemed naïve that the simple act of sex had held so much trepidation for me. Sharing a bed with Cassio was the least of my battles. Fixing this

family, making it somehow into my family, that was the most daunting challenge I could imagine.

Looking up into Cassio’s exhausted and wary eyes, I promised myself to master it.

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NINE

Cassio

Annoyance hummed under my skin. Giulia peered up at me calmly, thinking she knew everything. It was the advantage of youth—believing you knew how the world ran and convinced you could shape it to your ideals. She'd soon realize that ideals were just teenage foolishness.

"Come now," I gritted out, not wanting to release the frustration of the last few months on her. Ultimately, it was my fault for allowing this marriage, for thinking an eighteen-year-old girl could be a wife and mother. The idea that Giulia could become Gaia 2.0 turned my stomach over.

Giulia opened her mouth as if to say more, but I sent her a warning look. She'd need to learn when to shut up. She pursed her lips but remained quiet.

I led her to Daniele's room first. I opened the door but didn't turn the lights on. Daniele's bed was empty.

"Where is he?" Giulia whispered, worried, as she crossed the room toward the bed.

My heart clenched. Turning on my heel, I walked out and strode down the corridor. Steps followed me, and Giulia appeared at my side.

"Cassio?"

I didn't say anything—couldn't.

The door to the last room on the left was ajar as I knew it would be. I pushed it open. The light spilling in illuminated Daniele's small form on the huge king-sized bed. He was curled into himself on top of the comforter,

half covered by his own blanket. I took a deep breath, hating the feeling of guilt wilting my insides. Anger toward Gaia was an emotion I could handle better.

I could feel Giulia's eyes on me, the myriad of questions she wanted to ask. In the silence of the room even her unspoken words frustrated me. She took a few hesitant steps toward Daniele. My hand shot out, clamping down on her upper arm with more force than intended. She winced, looking up at me in a wounded way that had nothing to do with my hard grip. I released her at once then walked past her toward the bed. For a moment, I watched my son's tear-stained face. He was only two, three in a month, an age when tears were still okay. Soon, they wouldn't be anymore.

I bent down and carefully picked him up, trying not to wake him. Whenever I did, he'd squirm away and start crying again. He didn't wake, however. His tiny head leaned against my chest as I cradled him against my body, the blanket swaddling him.

Giulia followed me without a word as I walked out of the bedroom and carried Daniele back to his own room. I put him down on his bed, covered him, then stroked his hair lightly. Feeling Giulia watching me from the doorway, I straightened and headed to her. She stepped back so I could close the door.

Giulia scanned my face, her expression filled with compassion. "Does he always come to your bedroom at night?"

"It's not mine," I pressed out. "It's Gaia's. I sleep in the master bedroom."

"Oh." Confusion showed on Giulia's face. "You didn't share a bedroom with your late wife?"

I gritted my teeth, trying to stifle my anger and worse, that heavy feeling of sadness. "No." I headed to Simona's room. Giulia hurried after me. She couldn't let it drop. She was too curious. "Because you don't want to share a bedroom?"

I glared. "No. Because Gaia didn't want to share a bed with me. Now stop the questions." My voice was harsh, threatening—a tone meant for soldiers that displeased me, definitely not for my wife.

I turned away from Giulia's hurt expression. My grip on the handle was crushing as I shoved open the door. Not waiting for Giulia, I crossed the room and headed toward the crib. Simona slept soundly. Some of the darkness in my chest lifted, never all of it though. I couldn't even remember

a time when my thoughts hadn’t been dominated by darkness. I stroked my daughter’s chubby cheek with my thumb then leaned down and kissed her forehead. I was on the way out when Giulia spoke up.

“What about the baby monitor?”

I froze. She was right. Tonight was the first time Sybil or one of the maids wasn’t staying overnight. They had always taken the monitor during the night. Simona’s cries had still woken me, and she’d only settled down when I’d consoled her. Returning to the crib, I grabbed the monitor from the sideboard. When I stepped back into the corridor and closed the door, I said, “How did you know?”

Giulia shrugged. “I read about baby monitors, and when I saw it sitting there, I thought we needed it.” She bit her lip. “Have you never taken it with you before?”

I stared down at the small device. “No. Gaia or Sybil kept it at night...” I trailed off then held the monitor out to Giulia. She took it with a small frown.

“It should pick up the smallest sound, but unless Simona starts crying, you don’t need to get up.”

Giulia only nodded, not saying anything when I could tell she wanted to. I was glad for her silence. I nodded down the corridor. “Let’s go to bed. I need to get up early, and Simona will probably wake us a few times tonight.”

I led Giulia toward the master bedroom, wondering how long she’d want to sleep in it before she moved to one of the guest bedrooms. I turned on the lights and motioned for Giulia to enter. She slipped past me into the vast room. She looked around curiously. Her three suitcases waited beside the door to the walk-in-closet.

“I told Sybil that you’d probably want to put your clothes away yourself.”

“Yes, thank you. That way I’ll know where everything is,” she said absent-mindedly as she walked toward the window, peering outside.

It was too dark to see much but the general outline of the gardens. She looked petite, and I had to resist the urge to walk up to her and touch her shoulders. Last night she had to accept my closeness, but I wouldn’t force it on her again.

I cleared my throat, causing Giulia to turn. Her gaze fell on the king-sized dark-wood bed on the left. Her expression tightened ever so slightly.

“I’ll get ready,” I gritted out and headed for the en suite bathroom.

I wasn’t even sure what had me on edge tonight. I had been wound tightly for almost a year now. It was getting harder and harder to suppress the flood of emotions. Only once I’d released my frustration, and it had felt good, so fucking good. It had led to this point, had ultimately cost my children their mother. Trying to stop this dangerous train of thought, I started brushing my teeth and getting ready for bed. A bed I’d have to share with another woman who didn’t want me.

Giulia still hid her resentment better than Gaia ever did. Yet she couldn’t feel anything but resentment considering she was forced to marry me. Her feelings toward sharing a bed with me again tonight had been clear as day. Trepidation. She needn’t have worried. Despite the dark hunger for my young wife’s lovely pussy, I was a man who could control himself. I abhorred the idea of sleeping with a woman again who didn’t want me. The years with Gaia had been bad enough. Even when she’d approached me for sex—which only happened when she had ulterior motives—she never wanted to sleep with me. She didn’t even think of me when I fucked her.

A new wave of fury twisted my insides. I spit the toothpaste into the sink then washed my face and changed into my pajama bottoms. My anger didn’t lessen as I stepped back into the bedroom. Giulia had changed into a silken nightgown with tiny sunflowers all over it. She stared at a picture of the white beach taken from my summer house on Long Beach Island on a beautiful spring day. A picture meant to call to the calm within me.

In vain. It was unreasonable to be furious over her choice of wardrobe, especially when she looked exceptionally pretty in her gown, but I was. “Didn’t I tell you to get rid of those sunflower atrocities?”

Giulia jumped and whirled around. Her hair settled in smooth ringlets on her bare shoulders. Her eyes were wide—as blue as the sky in the photo above her head.

“Excuse me?”

More anger, which wasn’t even directed at Giulia, still it roared louder inside my chest since I’d seen Daniele on his mother’s bed. Every night he went there, no matter how often I told him not to.

“I sent you new clothes. I expect you to wear them.”

Giulia raised her chin. “While I understand your need for me to look like a lady in public, I can’t see why I can’t wear the clothes I love in private. Only because I’m your wife now doesn’t mean I’m not still me. I

won’t become someone else only because you don’t like who I am. You chose to marry me. You can’t form me into the wife you want. You can’t control everything, even if you think you have to.”

What did she know?

I stalked toward her.

She tossed her head back to meet my furious gaze. Goose bumps flashed across her skin and her nipples hardened, straining against the thin fabric of her nightgown.

“Is that so? I control hundreds of men and an entire city, but you think I can’t control you?” I stepped closer, backing Giulia into the wall.

“Stop intimidating me,” she said, trying to step past me. I thrust my arm out, bracing my palm against the wall beside her head, caging her in.

“You will obey me.”

She regarded my arm then looked up. She stepped closer until we were almost touching, throwing me off.

“What will you do if I don’t *obey*?”

That goddamn strawberry scent filled my nose. Wrapping an arm around her waist, I jerked her toward me and lowered my head for a harsh kiss. She stiffened in my hold, gasped into my mouth. What the fuck was I doing?

I froze, caught off guard by his sudden closeness. How could he kiss me when he was angry?

He turned around with a sharp exhale and stalked a few steps away before he slanted me a cautious look. “You don’t have to be scared. I won’t force myself on you. Last night was necessary, but I won’t seek you out again until you want me to.”

He sounded tired again and as if he were certain I'd never want him to. What had happened between his wife and him? I pushed the thought of her to the back of my mind, and with it the accompanying uneasiness.

I should have said something, but I was overwhelmed—by the situation, by the kiss that still echoed in my lips, by the look in Cassio's eyes. I felt like I was caught up in a current, which spun faster and faster, leaving me disoriented. Yesterday morning I'd been me, an eighteen-year-old girl who loved art and Pilates. Now I was a wife, a stepmother, the society lady at an Underboss's side. With all my new roles, was there still room for me?

Cassio looked at me, nodding slowly, as if my expression gave him an answer to a question he hadn't even uttered. He walked over to the bed and sank down. His broad shoulders and back were covered by long, thin vertical scars that I hadn't noticed before. Many of them.

I approached him to get a better look. Cassio didn't say anything, only looked at me. I pointed at one of the scars then lightly touched it but pulled my hand away after a moment.

"You can touch them," Cassio said calmly, but his voice had an edgier note to it. I brushed my fingertips over the scars on his shoulder blades and back. Some fathers tortured their sons to make them strong. Cassio *was* strong and brutal. Was his father the reason for it? "Who did this? Your father?"

Cassio shook his head. The way he was watching me made me blush. I wasn't even sure why. "When I was around your age, a few of my men and I got captured by the Bratva. They whipped me before they moved on to other torture methods."

My mouth ran dry at his clinical tone. "My God, that's horrible." I sank down beside him on the edge of the bed. His musky scent made me want to lean closer, to run my nose along his skin and taste it. What a ridiculous thought.

"Why did you think my father did it?"

"Because that's how many Made Man make their sons strong. You know my uncles… abusing their children is their favorite sport."

Cassio's eyes lingered on the small scar on my knee then moved up to the one on my outer thigh and one on my upper arm. They weren't prominent, but sitting as close as we did, they couldn't be missed.

"I have one on my shoulder too," I said, twisting to show him the scar there. "Four scars. Not much in comparison to yours."

Something in his gaze made my pulse pick up, something dark lurking in its depth. “Those scars,” he murmured. “Did your father create them?”

Oh. Now I understood the look. “No,” I said quickly and without thinking put my hand on his. His eyes cut down to our hands then back up to me. “He never hit me. He wouldn’t. He adores me.” That sounded vain, but it was the truth. My father was certainly a violent man, but not at home, not to my mother and me.

Cassio chuckled. “I can see why he does.”

I bit my lip, surprised by his words.

“Who gave you those scars then?”

“When I was young, I loved to climb trees. We had a few old tall trees in our garden. I loved to climb them. I wasn’t supposed to, but I snuck out all the time. One time I didn’t pay enough attention and fell down. I broke a few bones and got cut up by a thorn bush beneath the tree. That’s it. Dad cut down all the trees after that.”

“You make it sound as if Felix is a good father, which contradicts the opinion I’ve gathered on him as a human being in general.”

I wasn’t offended by his words. Dad didn’t have the respect of his fellow Underbosses. Christian had complained about it more than once. “He doesn’t like you very much either.”

Cassio laughed, a deep belly laugh, which made me grin. “He gave me you. What a strange way to show me his disdain.”

Our arms brushed lightly. He was so warm, so tall, so strong. With his stubble and the square jaw and sharp cheekbones, he was the epitome of manliness. I’d always considered myself a girl who’d go for the ballet dancer type, the nerd with glasses, the sophisticated chess player. I had been so very wrong because Cassio’s body hit all the right buttons. My eyes lingered on the Famiglia tattoo on his chest, right over his heart.

Born in Blood, Sworn in Blood

I enter alive and leave dead.

I traced the intricate letters, not even thinking about it. His chest hair tickled my fingertips and sent a thrill into every nerve ending of my body. Cassio stilled under my touch, but his eyes burned me. I wanted him, wanted to feel his strong body on top of me again, his stubble scratching my inner thighs, his lips hot between my legs.

Heat flooded me.

I looked up. Cassio's chest heaved. He didn't move. He was waiting for me to say something, do something, but I didn't know how. Again, this sense of being overwhelmed hit me.

I dropped my hand.

Cassio cleared his throat. "I have an early morning. We should sleep."

"Yeah," I said quickly then got onto all fours to crawl to my side of the bed.

Cassio's sharp exhale made me cringe, realizing my thoughtless move. I'd practically jutted my butt out and knelt on all fours right beside him. I could practically see Cassio's restraint snapping. With a groan, he slung an arm around my hip and pressed a kiss right on my ass cheek before he pulled me on top of him. My lips were already parted with surprise when his tongue plunged into my mouth. His big hand covered the back of my head, holding me in place.

My pulse throbbed right between my legs at the fiery heat of Cassio's kiss, at the feel of his muscular thighs under my ass and the growing pressure of his desire for me.

A shrill cry burst through our bubble. We jerked apart. Cassio glanced to the baby monitor.

"Simona."

I pushed off his lap. My legs felt like rubber and my panties clung to my center.

My arousal evaporated the moment I realized that it was my job to console the crying baby and to do whatever else was required in a situation like that.

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TEN

Cassio

Giulia looked at me with wide eyes. My brain was working slower than usual. Her taste lingered on my tongue, and my thighs were still warm from her pretty ass. Despite my promise to keep my distance, I'd practically dragged her onto my lap the first chance I got. She hadn't resisted. Because she wanted me, or because she feared to refuse me?

Simona's cries grew in intensity.

"She's probably hungry."

"Okay?" Giulia looked like a deer in the headlights.

I sighed and stood, rearranging my dick so it wasn't as obvious. "Come on, I'll show you everything." Giulia pulled a robe over and followed after me. I was on the way downstairs to prepare the bottle, but Giulia froze. "Shouldn't we console her first before going down into the kitchen?"

I considered that then nodded slowly. Sybil had prepared the bottle while I took care of Simona. Once Sybil fed her, I returned to bed.

Giulia and I went to Simona's bedroom and walked in. I turned the lights on. Simona's face scrunched up with her cries, her skin already turning red. Her cries tore at me. She'd always been a crier, but since Gaia's death, it had become worse. Now every one of her cries seemed to ring with an undertone of accusation, and my guilt weighed heavy on my shoulders.

I walked over to the crib and picked Simona up, cradling her in my arms. She quieted only briefly. Sighing, I headed back to the door where

Giulia was hovering with an uncertain expression. “You don’t know anything about children, right?”

She hesitated. “Only what I’ve read.”

That was what I’d suspected. Her parents made it sound like she was a practiced babysitter, but of course that had been tactic. Rocking Simona gently, I headed downstairs, Giulia close behind me. I could only hope Daniele wouldn’t wake as well. I couldn’t comfort them both, not that he would let me console him.

Stifling my frustration, I entered the kitchen. It had been a while since I’d prepared a bottle, but Sybil had set everything out in preparation.

I nodded toward the bottles and formula. “You have to prepare the bottle.”

Giulia’s eyes snapped to me. “I’ve never done it.”

I sighed then held Simona out to her. “Then you’ll have to hold her while I show you how to do it.”

Giulia glanced at my daughter, swallowing. Embarrassment filled her face as she met my gaze, and I knew what she’d say before she did. “I’ve never held a baby in my life.”

For a moment, I felt the urge to lash out at her verbally, but I shoved it down. Giulia had even less say in marrying me than I did. It wasn’t her fault that she didn’t know the first thing about being a mother. “It’s not difficult. Just hold out your arms and take her.”

“What if I drop her? Or hurt her? Or—”

“Giulia, it’s going to be fine. You won’t drop her, and you won’t hurt her.”

Giulia nodded and finally held out her arms. I put Simona into them, and Giulia immediately cradled her to her chest. “Oh, she’s heavier than I thought.”

I hovered beside her to see if she could handle it, but Giulia only had eyes for Simona. She looked terrified and a little lost. Then Simona did what she always did when anyone but me or my sisters or mother held her; she began bawling, her tiny arms and legs thrashing as she tried to squirm away from the stranger.

Giulia’s eyes grew wide, scared, as she sought my gaze for help.

Sighing, I went over to the bottles. “Try to console her. She needs to get used to you.” Simona had never taken to Sybil or the other maids. If the same happened with Giulia, months of sleepless nights would turn into

years and my daughter would remain without a mother figure in her life. It was an option I didn't want to entertain.

"Shh… Shh." Giulia rocked Simona, but even from afar I could see her anxiety, and Simona could probably feel it too. The crying didn't cease. If possible, it got even more intense. I moved faster, preparing the formula, trying not to let the cries snap my patience. I wanted to call Felix right this moment and tell him that he'd regret lying to me, that I'd find a way to make him pay. The best way, of course, to pay him back would be to nullify our marriage because he'd cheated me of a promised mother figure. With the bottle, I walked over to Giulia, who looked close to tears herself. But it would be absolutely dishonorable to cancel the marriage at this point, and not just that…. Nothing in this world would make me give up Giulia now that I had her. Maybe she wasn't the mother my children needed, but fuck, she was what I craved.

The moment I took Simona from Giulia, her shoulders sagged with relief. Simona quieted in my hold and accepted the bottle, watching me with teary eyes, her chubby cheeks blotchy.

"I'm sorry," Giulia said. Guilt filled her expression.

I didn't say anything. Slowly, I made my way back upstairs and into Simona's room. Giulia was quiet. I should say something, tell her it would get better, but I wasn't sure if it was true.

Giulia watched me the entire time that I fed my daughter. Simona was calm as I cradled her against my chest. "Should I try to hold her again?" she asked, uncertain.

"No," I clipped. I couldn't bear another crying fit.

Giulia nodded slowly, looking away. Silence settled over us, only disturbed by the suckling sounds of Simona drinking her bottle. When she was finally done, my eyes burned with exhaustion. I tried to put Simona back down in her crib, but the moment I did, she began wailing again.

With a small sigh, I went over to the rocking chair in the corner and sank down. The thing groaned under my weight. "You can go to sleep. I don't need you."

Giulia winced as if I'd slapped her. She turned, walked out, and silently closed the door.

I rocked, watching my daughter who looked wide awake. This would be another sleepless night.

Simona had eventually fallen asleep so I was able to catch two hours of sleep before my alarm rang at six. Groaning, feeling bone-tired, I straightened in bed. Giulia sat up too. Just like after our first night together, her eyes were puffy from crying. Maybe our bond was doomed the same way my bond with Gaia had been.

“Good morning,” she said, tugging a strand of hair behind her ear and straightening her bangs. “I didn’t hear you come to bed.”

“It was late. Simona wouldn’t fall asleep.”

Giulia bit her lip. “Sybil’s going to be here today, right?”

I nodded. “You don’t have to worry. You won’t have to be alone with my children yet. Sybil will show you how to take care of them until you know what to do. But Sybil’s main job is to clean and cook.”

“Okay,” she said softly.

“I’m going to get ready. Your bodyguards are coming over at seven so I can introduce you before I leave for work.”

“Are they your late wife’s bodyguards?”

Fury burned in my chest. “No.” Which was mostly the truth.

Giulia got out of bed, but her eyes were on me. “When will you be home tonight?”

“I don’t know.” I headed into the bathroom and closed the door. The hot shower did nothing to dissipate the heavy sense of exhaustion.

While Giulia got ready, I dressed in my usual three-piece suit before I headed to Daniele’s room. As expected, he wasn’t inside. I found him on Gaia’s bed, still in his PJs, staring down at his tablet. “Daniele, you know you aren’t supposed to be in here.”

He didn’t react, except for rounding in his small shoulders and jutting out his chin. I went over to him and picked him up. He squirmed in my hold, but I didn’t set him down.

“It’s enough,” I snapped. My patience was running thin after last night.

He only struggled harder. My chest tightened in a mix of despair and frustration. “Daniele, stop it now!”

He froze and so did Giulia, who was watching from her spot in the doorway to our bedroom.

Simona began wailing in her room. Seconds later, the dog began barking up a storm downstairs. I stopped and for a moment, sure I'd lose it. Swallowing hard, I went over to Giulia and set Daniele down in front of her.

"Get him dressed and don't allow him to spend all day on the tablet. I'll take care of Simona." I didn't wait for her reply.

Turning my back on her and my son's accusing little face, I headed to my daughter. Once in her room, I rested my forehead against the cool door for a couple of heartbeats before finally I felt in a state of mind to console my little girl.

I stood frozen, staring down at the little boy. What had just happened? Daniele had struggled against Cassio's grip as if he was terrified of him. And for a moment, Cassio had appeared as if he was on the verge of losing control.

Loulou kept barking downstairs, but Simona quieted eventually, probably because Cassio had taken her out of her crib. Remembering last night's mess, I squared my shoulders and squatted before the little boy.

"Hello, Daniele. I'm Giulia."

Daniele looked at me with miserable milk-chocolate-brown eyes. His caramel-blond hair was a tousled mess and even looked knotted in places, as if it hadn't been combed properly in a long time.

"How about we get you ready for the day?"

He didn't react, only stared. My stomach tightened. This kid was hurting. His mother had died only a few months ago, and his dad was obviously overwhelmed by the situation. I didn't know what had happened,

didn’t know the extent of Daniele’s trauma, but it was obvious that he needed help. He looked thin too.

I straightened and held out my hand. “Will you show me to your room?”

Nothing. He looked down at the tablet clutched in his hand and turned it on. A sort of game with colorful balloons popped up. I didn’t want to forcefully carry him into his room like Cassio might have done. That wouldn’t help me getting the boy’s trust.

“Daniele, please, help me? I’m new here and I need you to show me your room. Will you help me?” I waited with extended hand.

Daniele didn’t take my hand or look up from the tablet, but he moved toward his room. I followed him inside. He sank down on his bed, the tablet on his lap.

Looking around, I spotted a wardrobe on the right side. Everything was in neutral tones: the walls, furniture, rugs—except for the colorful stuffed toy dinosaurs on the shelves and on his bed. I’d have to do something about that. In my research about children, I’d found images of beautiful hand drawings for nurseries.

After some rummaging, I finally found a pair of jean pants and a sweatshirt. Most of the clothes inside the drawers were for warmer temperatures and most of the winter clothes that I’d found looked too small for Daniele. I headed back to him and knelt down in front of him, tilting my head to see his face. He was focused on the screen, but briefly his lashes fluttered up. “Can you dress yourself?”

I didn’t know when kids learned things like that. When Daniele didn’t react, I reached for his tablet. He let out an enraged cry and turned away. “Daniele, we need to get you dressed.”

I took the tablet and Daniele threw himself at me, completely catching me off guard. The way I was kneeling, I had no chance to brace myself. I fell back and landed on my back with Daniele on top of me as he fought me for the tablet. His nails scratched my cheek.

“Enough!” Cassio roared and Daniele’s weight lifted off me. I jerked into a sitting position, still stunned. Cassio stood over me, clutching Daniele against his side, restraining the little boy’s thrashing arms. “I said enough!”

Daniele froze in Cassio’s hold. Cassio’s expression was thunderous. I swallowed and slowly scrambled to my feet. Cassio’s eyes slanted to my cheek, which was throbbing. I touched the spot and my fingertips came away stained with blood.

“Goddamn it,” Cassio said harshly, his voice shaking with an emotion I couldn’t place. He looked down at the now motionless boy in his arms. Daniele wasn’t the only one who was hurting. He went over to a changing table I hadn’t even noticed before and set Daniele down on it. I picked up the tablet from the floor and put it on the bed before I approached Cassio. I held out the clothes I’d chosen for Daniele.

Cassio nodded at the table. I put the clothes down as I watched Cassio undress Daniele who was still wearing diapers. Surprise washed over me. Shouldn’t he be potty-trained at almost three?

“Can you change a diaper?” Cassio asked, but his voice held an edge that suggested he knew the answer was no.

I shook my head. “I can learn.”

Cassio’s mouth thinned into a line. He changed the diaper quickly, and Daniele didn’t as much as twitch, only stubbornly stared off to the side. After that, Cassio got his son dressed. As suspected, the clothes were on the verge of being too small. Not too wide because he was thin, but definitely too short. Cassio lowered Daniele to the floor, and the boy went over to his tablet at once.

“For a while he didn’t need a diaper, then…” Cassio fell silent.

Then Gaia died.

“Is that why he’s so thin and not talking?”

Cassio swallowed and his expression hardened. “Yes. See if you can get him to eat more than a few morsels of food.”

Cassio scanned my face, his eyes lingering on my scratched cheek once more. “This was a mistake.”

Me. He meant I was a mistake because I wasn’t what he’d expected. But he and his family weren’t what I’d expected either.

So many things needed fixing in this house. Daniele, the boy with a trauma because of his mother’s death and his father’s possible involvement. Simona, who wailed the second I touched her. Loulou who’d never learned to be a family dog. And Cassio who dealt with demons I had no clue about.

Cassio rubbed his hand over his stubble then sighed. “This isn’t one of the dresses I bought for you. You can’t wear this when you meet your bodyguards.”

I glanced down. I wore black tights, a black pleated miniskirt with suspenders, and a yellow cashmere sweater. It wasn’t fancy, but certainly

nice enough for a day at home. “I don’t see why I need to dress up for them.”

Cassio’s eyes flashed. “Giulia, don’t test my patience. Not right now. I didn’t marry so I’d have another stubborn child to deal with.”

Gritting my teeth against a snappy comeback, I turned around. I didn’t want to fight with Cassio, but I wouldn’t change into one of those stuck-up dresses when there was absolutely no reason to do so. I didn’t get far. An arm wrapped around my stomach and sharply pulled me back so I was pressed to a hard body. Cassio’s palm pressed flat against my belly, holding me in place as he leaned down. “You *will* change now.”

The low command vibrated through my body in a way that thrilled and scared me.

“What’s your problem?”

“My problem is that you keep disobeying me and that your skirt is far too short when I’m not around.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Even my mother had never considered my clothes too daring or sexy, and she was conservative. The miniskirt might be short, but the tights were opaque, and my sweater certainly didn’t scream sexy vamp.

“I’m not joking,” Cassio growled.

I laughed again. “You’re being unreasonable.”

Cassio turned me around, one arm around my waist, the other cupping the back of my head. It wasn’t an intimate, loving gesture. It was dominance. “Don’t fight me on this. Not this. I won’t have you around men in that skirt when I’m not with you. Understood?”

His eyes burned with angry possession. I probably would have said more, but the sound of Daniele’s game reminded me that he was in the room behind us.

“Understood,” I said. “Now let go of me.”

He stepped back. I turned and went into our bedroom to change.

When I came downstairs in long black dress pants and a loose-fitting blouse tucked into my waistband, Cassio gave a pleased nod. I felt as if I was

wearing a costume. The clothes were uncomfortable. They weren't me.

"My men are waiting in my office to meet you."

"What about Simona? Where is she?"

"With Sybil in the kitchen. After I've introduced you to your bodyguards, you need to get Daniele down here. He can't stay in his room all day."

"I need to go clothes shopping. Nothing fits him."

"Then do that. Domenico and Elia will accompany you."

With his hand on the small of my back, he led me down the corridor to a massive wooden door. As we passed the room Loulou was locked in, she barked, causing Cassio's expression to tighten once more.

His office offered a stunning view of the gardens, beautifully kept as if they belonged to a mansion in the English countryside and not a family home. It didn't look as if the garden was used at all. Two men sat in wide armchairs across from a sleek oak desk. Both rose the second Cassio and I entered the room. Cassio kept his hand on my back as he motioned at the older man. "This is Domenico." The man looked to be in his sixties with short gray hair. He looked like he'd served in the military—straight back, perfectly ironed shirt, no-nonsense expression. "It's a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Moretti."

Mrs. Moretti. I glanced at Cassio, my husband. It hadn't really sunk in yet, not really. "And this is Elia." My gaze followed that of my husband's, toward the second man, and he was the complete opposite of Domenico. For one, he was young. Mid-twenties tops. He had wavy light-brown hair that was loosely styled back. His clothes accentuated a muscled body, and his smile came quick. It was easy-going, almost charming, but still with the necessary respect.

"Nice to meet you."

Cassio looked at me.

"Nice to meet you too," I said quickly. I was surprised. Domenico was exactly how I'd expected my bodyguards to look, considering how jealous Cassio seemed to be. Elia definitely wasn't. Maybe that explained why Cassio hadn't wanted me to wear the miniskirt. Yet it seemed unlikely that he'd choose a man as my bodyguard he didn't trust absolutely. Cassio thrived on control. He was sure of his power. Or maybe he wanted to confirm the extent of his control, and this was his test. Question was: whom was he testing? Elia or me.

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ELEVEN

Cassio left shortly after introducing me to my new bodyguards. I thought he might have breakfast with the children and me, but apparently he never did. He startled me when he bent down for a goodbye kiss. I didn't think he was the type of man for public displays of affection, but maybe that kiss was meant to show dominance. Still, his lips on mine felt nice.

When the front door shut after him, I stood in the lobby, feeling a little lost. I could feel Elia's and Domenico's eyes on me as they hovered a few steps beside me, waiting for orders.

I was the mistress of this house now, responsible for two small children and a dog. Trying not to panic, I smiled at my bodyguards. A smile almost always saved the situation. "I'll have breakfast with the children first. After that, we can go shopping. Would you like to join us for breakfast or do you have a room where you'd rather rest until I need your services."

Domenico nodded. "There's a guard house on the premises—"

"We'd like to join you for breakfast," Elia interrupted him. Domenico frowned but didn't say anything. Elia established eye contact with me. He was friendly and open. Domenico definitely had the surly bodyguard act down.

"All right. Why don't you go ahead…" I trailed off. "Do you know where breakfast usually takes place?"

Elia smiled.

Domenico only shook his head.

I gave an embarrassed smile. “Okay then, I’ll head into the kitchen to find Sybil.”

Gaia used to eat in the dining room, but the room was too big, too formal for my taste. The kitchen, however, had a white country-house style with big windows and a long wooden table that showed traces of use.

Simona rolled around the kitchen in her baby walker while Sybil cooked a sort of breakfast bake with eggs and sausage. Simona eyed me critically, but she was busy turning colorful wheels on the tray at the front of her walker.

“Why don’t you go ahead and sit down while I get Daniele?” I said. Domenico and Elia sank down in the chairs at once.

“He doesn’t eat breakfast. He usually hides when I try to get him.”

Turning around to Sybil, I said, “I’ll get him down, don’t worry. Did you walk Loulou yet?”

“No, I never do. She’s got the box.”

“I’ll let her into the garden then until I have time to walk her later.”

Sybil turned to me, wide-eyed. “The master doesn’t want the dog in the garden.”

“He put Loulou there last night so he doesn’t seem to mind.”

“No, no. That was to punish the dog, but it’s not supposed to pee in the garden.”

“Well, that’s going to change now.” Elia and Domenico regarded me curiously. I gave them another smile before I headed upstairs.

I had a feeling I knew how to draw Daniele out of his room. When I stepped inside, he was gone. I didn’t find him in his mother’s old bedroom either, but I heard a sound from under the bed. “Daniele? I’m going to let Loulou out into the garden so she can run around a bit. Do you want to join us?”

I waited and after a couple of minutes, a dark-blond head poked out from under the bed. He scrambled to his feet and regarded me suspiciously, the tablet clutched to his chest.

I held out my hand. “Come. I’m sure Loulou can’t wait to see the garden.”

He didn’t take my hand, but he followed me downstairs. I stepped in front of him when I opened the door to Loulou’s prison. She waited right in front of it. The floor behind her was covered with pee and poo. Sighing, I bent down and scooped her up.

Daniele watched me, open-mouthed. I stroked Loulou's fur and his face filled with longing. Remembering Cassio's words about her snapping, I decided not to let him touch her for now. Both needed to heal before they could really become friends.

Daniele fell into step beside me as I crossed the living room to the French doors. The cold November air wafted into my face. Staying inside, I set Loulou down on the terrace. For a moment, she didn't move, only raised her nose and let the wind tug at her fur. Then she stormed off. My heart skipped a beat thinking she was trying to run away. Instead, she just ran, twisting and turning like a hare. She ran and ran and ran, as if she was delirious with her newfound freedom.

Daniele stood close to me, following everything with childish wonder.

I squatted beside him, even as the uncomfortable fabric of my pants made it difficult. "She's happy, see?"

He nodded but didn't take his eyes off Loulou. Daniele and I stayed like that for almost ten minutes, and Loulou only stopped once to pee before dashing off again. But I was getting cold. Straightening, I pushed two fingers between my lips and let out a whistle. Daniele's head snapped up to me, his little mouth falling open.

I whistled again, even though Loulou was already trotting my way. "Do you want to learn how to whistle like that?"

Daniele nodded slowly.

"Then I'll teach you."

Loulou wagged her tale hesitantly, but she kept a few steps between Daniele and her. I didn't know if something had happened or if she'd just never learned to deal with children, but I hoped I could fix both of them.

Daniele and I entered the kitchen. The room smelled of bacon and freshly brewed coffee, and my stomach tightened at once. I hadn't eaten much last night, too nervous before coming to my new home. Now I was starving. Loulou was a couple of steps behind us, her tail tucked between her legs, obviously overwhelmed. I knew how that felt…

Sybil shook her head. "That's not good. The master won't like it."

I only smiled. "Thank you for making us breakfast." Simona already sat in a highchair, but there was a second one beside it.

Sybil set the breakfast casserole down on the table then grabbed Daniele, who started screaming. Despite his struggling, she took the tablet

from him and tried to push him into his highchair. Domenico got up as if to help her restrain him.

“No,” I said firmly. Both of them gave me looks. Elia remained, watching me.

“He won’t eat if he’s not confined to his chair,” Sybil said.

I took Daniele from her, which wasn’t easy due to his struggling, then I set him down on a chair. “Do you want a big boy chair?”

He quieted. Then his eyes darted to the tablet.

“No,” I said softly. “You can have your tablet after breakfast, but none of us are playing games while we eat. You’re a big boy, Daniele. That’s why you can’t play during meals and why you’re allowed to sit on a grown-up chair.”

His eyes met mine and for a moment. The sadness in them seemed too big for someone that small to carry. I swallowed. Without thinking, I stroked his head. He stilled. Clearing my throat, I straightened and pushed his chair a bit closer to the table. “Can you get a pillow?” I asked Domenico. He disappeared and returned a couple of minutes later with a throw pillow.

“I have to lift you so Domenico can put the pillow on the chair so you’re taller, okay?”

Daniele gave a small nod. I grabbed him under the arms and raised him then quickly lowered him on the pillow. Now his head was level with the table.

I took the seat beside him. Sybil gave me a small thankful nod before she turned back to Simona, who refused to be spoon-fed.

“Eat,” I told my bodyguards before I scooped a bit of the casserole on my plate. “Do you want to share a plate with me?” I asked Daniele, holding out a fork to him. After a moment of consideration, he took it. I pierced a slice of sausage and stuffed it in my mouth. “It’s good. Try it.”

Daniele only poked the food with the fork. Soon Loulou hovered under the table, obviously hoping for scraps. Before I could stop him, Daniele threw a slice of sausage on the floor, which Loulou scarfed down at once.

“Daniele!” Sybil exclaimed, but I raised my palm.

Daniele jutted his chin out and one look at his eyes told me he was about to retreat into himself if I didn’t do something.

“If you want to feed Loulou, you have to eat too. How about this? For every bite you give her, you need to eat one in turn?”

Daniele considered that for a moment before he gave a quick nod then speared the smallest slice of sausage on the plate and pushed it into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed, then tossed another scrap down for Loulou.

Sybil sighed. “The master won’t like that. The dog isn’t supposed to be in the kitchen, much less get food from the table.”

It wasn’t ideal, but if this bargain got Daniele to eat, I’d take it until I could figure out why he acted the way he did and could fix it. I almost laughed. How was I supposed to fix traumatized children? A neglected dog?

By trying. That was all I could do, and I would try, because Simona, Daniele, and Loulou, and maybe even Cassio needed me.

After breakfast, Loulou, sated by more sausage and eggs than a small dog should have, curled up under the table to sleep. Domenico and Elia went ahead to prepare the cars for our shopping trip while Sybil was busy cleaning Loulou’s room, which wouldn’t serve as that from this day on. I wanted her to be part of this family.

I was left alone in the kitchen with Daniele, still perched on the pillow, now with the tablet on his lap, and Simona who squirmed in her high chair. These two kids were now mine to take care of. The weight of my responsibility sat squarely on my shoulders as I watched them. I didn’t feel like a mother. Would they ever accept me? Maybe I should lower my expectations and start by becoming their friend. That was the first step.

I approached Simona and smiled. She eyed me curiously. “Hello, Simona, I’m Giulia.” Some of the banana oatmeal she’d had for breakfast stuck to her cheek. I reached for a tea towel and wetted it with my spittle before I wiped at Simona’s skin. God, I was turning into my aunts. I’d always hated when they’d wiped at something with their own spittle. Now that was me. Simona squirmed but didn’t cry. I marked it down as a small victory.

“All done,” I declared. “Now we need to get you out of this chair and ready for a shopping trip.” I grabbed her under the arms, lifted her out of the chair, then balanced her on my hip like I’d seen other people do. Simona

was silent, but her eyes had become big; she wasn't convinced of me yet. For once, Daniele wasn't looking at his screen. His intense look was fixed on me and Simona.

"You don't have to be worried about your sister, Daniele. I'm going to take care of you two."

Sybil sighed from the doorway. "They're too young to understand everything you're telling them. Maybe you should explain less. You're the adult, and you don't need to justify your actions to them."

I frowned. It was obvious that she thought I was another child to take care of. I was young and inexperienced when children were concerned, but I was also supposed to be the new mistress of the house and a role model for these children. I had to put my foot down. "Thank you for your input, Sybil. But how we raise Daniele and Simona is only Cassio's and my business."

After a moment of stunned silence, Sybil gave a curt nod. "Of course." Disapproval still oozed from her every pore, and I didn't really blame her. It must be strange to have someone as young as myself as your boss.

"The breakfast casserole was absolutely delicious. Thank you for that," I said as a peace offering. I didn't want Sybil as my enemy. I needed all the help I could get.

Surprise crossed Sybil's face. Then she nodded, and a hint of pride flickered in her eyes.

Simona on my hip, I held out my hand for Daniele. "Come, let's go shopping. We'll get you new shoes and cool shirts." Daniele looked back down to his tablet.

Searching for a way to convince him, my eyes settled on Loulou, who slept under the table. "We're going to buy new things for Loulou too. Don't you want to help me choose the best toys for her?"

Daniele's head shot up, and he hopped off the stool at once.

"The tablet has to stay here. You need to really pay attention so you can check out all the toys."

Daniele hesitated, the tablet pressed to his chest. Then slowly he put it down on the chair and came toward me. Simona was tugging at my bangs curiously. Daniele didn't take my hand, but he followed me out into the entrance hall where Elia was waiting for us.

"Do you need help?" He motioned at Simona.

“Actually, yes. I can’t put on my shoes and help Daniele with his jacket when I’m holding her.”

Elia smiled and came toward me. As he took Simona from me, his fingers brushed my hand. For some reason it didn’t feel like an accident. Simona began wailing the moment he held her, and even if her cries bothered me, I was secretly elated that she hadn’t cried while in my arms. I quickly got dressed and found a jacket for Daniele before we finally set out.

I was wedged between the two child seats in the back of the Cadillac while Elia and Domenico sat in the front. When I’d gone shopping in the past, it had taken two or three hours tops, but with two small children, things were very different. Eventually I gave up on having them try on the clothes and just held the pieces in front of them, hoping they’d fit. Despite the crying fits, it was enormous fun buying kids’ clothing. There were so many cute pieces that even my ovaries exploded. I couldn’t wait for Cassio to see them, even if I was a bit worried regarding his reaction to the cute overall dresses that I got for Simona. One of them had sunflower buttons.

For Daniele I got a few sweatshirts with big brother quotes which, when I told him what they said, made him smile a tiny bit.

Six hours, ten crying fits, three changed diapers (which proved to be extraordinarily tricky), and ten shopping bags later, we returned home. Both children had fallen asleep on the drive to the mansion and didn’t even wake when we carried them inside. Simona in my arms and Daniele in Elia’s.

After we’d brought them to bed, Elia followed me back downstairs. “You have a knack for kids.”

“Thank you,” I said. I still wasn’t entirely sure if he was being friendly… or more. Something was definitely off.

“Loulou!” I called. A scratching sounded behind the storage room door followed by barking. Sighing, I opened the door. Sybil must have locked her in again. It was already much later than I’d planned. Maybe Loulou had peed inside the house again. I needed to figure out a schedule that allowed me to take care of the children and Loulou. I let her out in the garden, Elia always by my side. I slanted him a curious look. “Have you been working for Cassio for long?”

“As a bodyguard? Less than a year. But I’ve been working other jobs for him for close to ten years.”

“Did you guard Gaia too?”

Elia’s face closed off at once. He nodded toward the garden. “Is the dog supposed to dig a hole?”

My head twisted around. “What?” Loulou was indeed digging a hole, half of her small body disappearing in the ground already.

I rushed outside. “No! Loulou, don’t.”

She peered up then continued as if nothing had happened. I snatched her up, grimacing when I saw how dirty she was, and now I was too.

I moved back into the house. Dirt rained down on the floor and me. Loulou’s fur was beyond saving, that much was clear. “It’s bath time.”

To my surprise, Loulou didn’t fight me when I put her in the tub. She just stood there and let it happen. After the bath and towel-drying her, I grabbed the trimming scissors I’d bought and settled on the floor of the entrance hall with Loulou in my lap. It was the room that seemed the easiest to clean. There weren’t any rugs. At first, when I brought the scissors near her body, she squirmed, but eventually when she realized I was trying to help her, she relaxed and let me cut her fur. The matted fur had to make her skin itchy. When I was done, she was half her previous size and looked impossibly adorable. “Done,” I said and released her.

For a moment, she didn’t move. Then she sprinted toward her new basket that I’d set up in the living room and threw herself inside before she began to wiggle happily, her tiny legs in the air as she enjoyed the feeling of air on her skin. Only an inch of fur remained, but I had a feeling it would grow soon. Looking down at my clothes, covered in fur and dirt, I decided to clean up too.

I rushed up the stairs and changed into more comfortable clothes. Black over-the-knee socks, pleated skirt, and the yellow sweater. At once, I felt more like myself.

After checking on our newest drug lab and one of our underground casinos, I headed to my parents' house because Father had asked me for a meeting. Of course, I knew what it was about.

Giulia.

Before I got out of the car, I sent Elia a text. He called me shortly after. "How's it going?"

"She's insecure around me. She seems to notice that something is off, but I don't think she knows what to make of me just yet. She's good with the kids and dog."

"She is?"

"Very patient. Just really lovely."

Everyone used that word for my wife, and damn it, she was indeed lovely. "Hmm. Don't come on to her too fast. It might make her suspicious."

"All right, Boss."

I hung up and left the car. The door to my parents' house opened before I got the chance to ring the bell. I gave my mother a look. "Have you been looking out of the window?"

She shrugged. "I was just wondering what you were doing in the car."

"Working, mother. I'm always working."

"Even so shortly after marrying that girl?"

"That girl's name is Giulia and stop calling her girl. It makes me feel old."

Mother touched my cheek. "You're not old."

I stepped out of her reach. "Where's Father?"

"In the cigar lounge. He won't listen to me. Can't you tell him to drop this awful habit? He's already had three heart attacks. The smoking doesn't help."

"Father won't listen to me either." The cigar lounge was filled with the thickly sweet aroma of Cuban cigars. Father sat in the armchair in front of the fireplace, a glass with whisky in one and a cigar in the other hand.

He smiled, the wrinkles in his face deepening. "Good to see you, Cassio. Take a seat."

I sank down in the armchair beside his and shook my head when he offered me a cigar. I'd never liked the taste very much. "What is it you wanted to discuss?"

“How are things back home with Giulia?”

I gave him an exasperated look. “Is that what this meeting is about? Marriage counseling?”

Father leaned forward, putting his cigar down in the tray. “Our men admire you. They fear you too. Some might even hate you. If your second marriage ends as unfortunately as your first, then hate and fear might become too dominant.”

I pushed out of the chair, but Father put a wrinkled hand on my arm. “Stay. I’m an old man. I’m allowed to tell my son the truth.”

“It’s the truth as you see it, Father.”

He waited.

Sighing, I sank back down and leaned back. “Things are as well as they can be, considering Giulia’s age and the situation as a whole. Nothing about this is ideal. I’m trying to exercise damage control.”

“Damage control,” Father scoffed. “Marriage is a matter of emotion. If you expect the worst, the worst is what you’ll get.”

“If you expect the worst, you’re prepared for the worst. I won’t be caught off-guard ever again.”

“Maybe you should give Giulia the benefit of the doubt. She’s a lovely girl. She’s nothing like Gaia.”

“I don’t know what kind of *woman* Giulia is.”

“And whose fault is that?” Father inquired.

I shook my head. “Does this conversation serve another purpose than to criticize the way I handle *my* marriage?”

“I’m worried about you, Cassio,” Father said quietly, his eyes filled with sorrow. “You are everything I wanted in a son. You are strong, you are just, you never shy away from the hard decisions. I never doubted your ability to rule Philadelphia.”

“But now you do?”

Father’s shoulders sagged. Even though his parlor was pale, he reached for the cigar again. “A temple needs more than one pillar to stand. There’s more to life than work.”

I stared off into the flames of the fireplace. “Work is the only constant in my life right now.” It was a confession I regretted the moment I said it.

Father leaned forward and patted my leg. “Then change it.”

I glanced at my watch. “I need to go now. I’m meeting Christian to discuss his findings about that new chapter of the Tartarus MC. They’re

popping up like weeds."

I stood and this time, Father didn't try to stop me.

Mother followed me to the door, trying to convince me to stay for lunch, but I wasn't in the mood for their meddling anymore. I kissed her cheek then hurried to my car.

Christian and I met in a small Italian place that served the best risotto in town. Christian already sat in our usual booth when I walked in. I gave him a curt nod when I slid into the seat across from him. "Any news on the chapter?"

Christian didn't say anything for a while. "How's Giulia?" I didn't like the undercurrent of warning in his voice one bit.

"She's well. She's my wife now, Christian. She isn't your concern. She's mine."

"I can accept that as long as you promise that she won't end up like Gaia."

I jerked up and bent over the table, grasping him by the throat and shoving him back against the bench. His face turned red, but he held my gaze. "Careful, Christian. In this city, my word is law. The protection of your father, and even that is limited, ends at the borders of Baltimore."

"I don't need my father's protection or I wouldn't be here, working under you," he pressed out. "Giulia is my little sister. I'm going to try to protect her as well as I can."

I tightened my fingers on his throat. "Giulia is safe with me. She doesn't need your protection." I released him and sat back, pushing my tie back under my vest and smoothing my jacket.

Christian massaged his throat. "No wonder that Luca likes you so much. You and him have very similar tics."

"The bikers are planning something. Look what they did in New Jersey and New York. We'll have to keep an eye on them."

"I'm doing that. It's not easy to establish contacts."

We talked only about business after that, even if it was clear that Christian wasn't happy about it. Too many people were trying to meddle in my marriage, and I didn't appreciate it in the slightest.

It was almost midnight when I unlocked the front door and entered the entrance hall. Light from the living room caught my attention. Elia wouldn't be waiting in there. The guards had their own small house on the premises where they could spend the night.

Something darted toward me. It took me a moment to understand that it was the dog. She yapped, and I braced myself to grab her again before she destroyed another pair of my pants.

“No, Loulou. Come here!” Giulia ordered. She appeared in the doorway to the living room, only dressed in a silken nightgown. She was barefoot and her hair was tousled as if she’d fallen asleep on the sofa.

To my surprise, the dog stopped its attack and trotted over to my young wife. She bent down and patted it. That was when I realized that most of its fur was gone.

“You took it to a hairdresser?”

Giulia laughed, her eyes sparkling with mirth as she straightened. “No, I don’t know any dog stylists. I cut her fur. She had too many knots. I couldn’t brush it out.”

I nodded, not really interested in the dog. If it wasn’t for Daniele, I’d have given it away a long time ago. Every time I looked at the thing, images popped up in my head that I didn’t need to remember. Giulia leaned against the doorframe, looking lovely.

The dog sat obediently beside her leg, regarding me as if I were an intruder in my own home. I looked around for the reason why she was awake. “What are you doing up?”

Giulia frowned. “I was waiting for you to come home.”

I shrugged off my coat and hung it up before I turned back to her. “Did something happen?”

Giulia shook her head and came toward me. I peered down. Barefoot and in her flimsy nightclothes, the contrast between us became even more apparent.

She put a hand against my chest and shivered. “God, it’s freezing outside.” Goose bumps pimpled her pale skin, and my eyes followed them to the opening of her robe and the dip of her nightgown.

“It’s winter.” It was an absolutely superfluous thing to say, but it was late and Giulia’s closeness fogged up my brain. “Answer my question, did something happen?”

She smiled uncertainly. “Nothing happened, Cassio. But I want to be there when you return from work. Isn’t that how it’s supposed to be?”

I stared. Since I’d moved out from my parents’ home, nobody waited up for me, and if Gaia ever had, then only to be the harbinger of bad news. “You don’t need to feel obligated to wait for me. I work long hours.”

I pressed my palm to her lower back and nudged her toward the staircase. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“I’m not a child, Cassio.”

The dog followed us as Giulia stepped onto the stairs. I barred its way. “Why isn’t it locked in its room? It isn’t allowed upstairs.”

“It won’t stay in that room anymore.”

My eyebrows rose. Giulia stood on the first step so she was almost eye level with me. “I didn’t realize I made that decision.”

“You didn’t, but I did.”

I grabbed her hip. “I’m the master of the house.” God, that sweet strawberry scent was driving me insane.

“Do you expect me to ask you for permission for every little thing? I can handle Loulou, so let me handle her.”

“It won’t go upstairs,” I said firmly.

She nodded and gave the dog an order. To my surprise, Loulou trotted back into the living room. “She’s got her basket in there. It’s supposed to be her safe haven.”

Shaking my head, I walked up the stairs. I was too exhausted for this nonsense. Giulia followed quietly, but I could practically feel her need to talk. We stepped into the bedroom and I closed the door. “How did things go with my children?”

“Good. I went shopping with them. We’re getting to know each other. I’m trying to become their friend—”

“They don’t need a friend. They need a mother figure. They need guidance and someone who leads the way.”

“If that was all they needed, you wouldn’t need me since you are so good at leading,” she said.

I paused at her insolence. Most people showed me respect without me having to do anything, but Giulia kept defying me in the most infuriating way possible. “I’m taking a shower. Go to bed and try to sleep.” I didn’t wait for her response and disappeared into the bathroom. I took my time getting ready for bed, hoping Giulia would be asleep by then. She wanted to get to know me. I wasn’t sure if I wanted her to.

When I emerged, Giulia stood in front of the window. I stifled a sigh. “Why aren’t you in bed?”

She let out a small, disbelieving laugh. “Because I think we need to talk. We are married.”

“I don’t see what we need to talk about.”

She stomped toward me, stopping so close that the strawberry scent flooded my nose again. “A lot. I want this marriage to work, but that won’t happen if we don’t spend time together. Do you usually come home this late?”

“Yes, frequently. I’m Underboss, Giulia.”

“My father’s Underboss and so are many of my uncles, and trust me, they have more than enough time to waste on golf courses or on top of their mistresses.”

A laugh wedged itself in my throat, but I suppressed it. “My work ethic is very different from theirs.”

“As your wife I have a right to make demands so this marriage can work, and I’m asking you to be home for dinner so the kids and I can spend time with you.”

My anger rose again, even as a small part of me was pleased that she wanted to spend time with me. “This marriage is one of convenience.”

Giulia’s eyes flashed. “I suppose it’s very convenient for you to have me as your nanny and for your personal pleasure without the burden of having to talk to me.”

She was infuriating. I pulled her against me, my mouth so close to hers, for a moment I almost forgot myself. “We’ve had sex once, girl, so the pleasure factor in our marriage has been very limited, and as far as your nanny qualities go, I’m not convinced.”

Her nose tilted up. “Then give me back to my parents, if I’m not satisfactory. Didn’t you stipulate some kind of return in the deal?”

“Over my dead body,” I growled and jerked her against me. I kissed her harshly, losing myself in that godforsaken sweetness that robbed me of my senses. I couldn’t control myself around her. I didn’t want to.

Remembering my promise, I ripped away from her and staggered a few steps back. I wouldn’t force her. “This wasn’t meant to happen.”

Giulia’s face was flushed. “Why not?”

Her question threw me off. “I told you I won’t sleep with you until you want me to.”

Giulia swallowed then smiled bashfully. And I knew what she’d say from the look of desire in her eyes before she uttered the words. “What if I want you to?” Her voice was low and hesitant.

My pulse throbbed in my temple from our altercation. It had excited me more than a little, but her words blasted the last shreds of my composure.

Despite the truth in her words, I couldn't believe them. My muscles tensed. When I'd exited the bathroom, I felt exhausted wariness. Now, any tiredness was replaced by eagerness, but my suspicion remained. "You want me to?"

My voice was low, drenched with desire and warning. I took a step closer. Giulia shivered and her nipples puckered. Was she aroused or scared? Probably both.

She nodded. "I want you to."

Another step closer. Blood pooled in my cock at her words. Still, my doubt remained. "Why? Last time was painful for you."

"Not everything," she admitted, blushing. "Not your mouth."

My eyes darted to the apex of her thighs, hidden by her nightgown, remembering her taste, her scent. "Fuck."

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TWELVE

“Fuck.” He looked as if he’d lost a battle with himself.

He prowled toward me, cupped the back of my head, and backed me into the window. “You want my mouth?”

The desire in his eyes, in his voice, scorched me with its intensity.

My mouth became dry. “Yes.”

He bent down and kissed me. His mouth, his tongue, they demanded my surrender like the rest of him. He wanted control and I gave in, let the kiss consume me until he dragged his mouth away, panting. “Like this?”

I was dazed and couldn’t follow his words. His mouth pulled into a dominant smile. “Do you want my mouth like this? Or somewhere else?”

“Somewhere else,” I got out, even if the words were hardly more than an exhale.

“On your pussy?” he rasped before he prevented me from replying by kissing me again. Maybe the fight had lowered his protective walls—I didn’t care because Cassio saying that word was incredibly sexy. He lifted me into his arms and carried me over to the bed, where he laid me down carefully then followed suit, his strong body pressing me into the mattress.

He kept kissing me with silent urgency as his hands shoved down my panties. My nightgown was next. He stopped the kiss to drag the garment over my head. I lay back, allowing him to admire me, and he did. His hungry gaze slid over my body. He was already hard in his pajama bottoms, and his muscled stomach heaved with every breath. I felt the unreasonable

urge to follow the trail of hair disappearing in his waistband with my tongue. I'd admired attractive boys from afar and appreciated them in an abstract, curious way. None of them had left enough of an impact to feature in my fantasies when I touched myself. My body's reaction to Cassio was on another level. Despite his age, or maybe because of it, the sight of his strong all-man body sent thrills of desire through my body even before he touched me.

"You're so fucking lovely," he groaned before he hovered over me, engulfing me with his manly scent. The warm, comforting aroma was like a drug to my system. His lips found mine for a possessive kiss before he moved lower. I watched as his mouth closed around my nipple, and at the first tug, I gasped, my hand flying up to clutch at his head.

"Yes!" The word slipped out without intention.

He looked up, holding my gaze as he sucked. His mouth was hot around my sensitive skin. I felt the shockwave between my legs and clenched.

"I should have done this last night."

God, he should have. This felt amazing. He lowered himself between my legs, and I opened them for his strong body without hesitation, loving the feel of his powerful, warm body on top of me. He cupped both of my breasts with his big hands, squeezed lightly, never taking his eyes off me—nor did I take mine off him. The sight of this man touching me turned me on.

Kneading my breasts gently, he lavished my nipples with attention, kisses, licks, and sucks until I was panting. Without thinking, I wrapped my legs around him and pushed my center against his stomach, needing friction. My wetness coated the firm muscles and caused Cassio to groan low in his throat. His eyes flashed with triumph and hunger. His mouth worked my breasts with even more fervor until I was close to losing my mind with need for release. I kept rubbing myself against Cassio's abs almost desperately, but it wasn't enough—not nearly enough. I needed more, but wasn't sure how to say it.

I made a small impatient sound in the back of my throat, my fingers clawing at Cassio's shoulder, trying to tell him without words.

His eyes seemed to darken with realization. "Now I crave something sweet."

I frowned until I realized what he meant, and then I could have wept from relief. He pushed up on his palms, and I lowered my legs from his

back. Looking down his body, he brushed his fingers over his lower abs glistening with my lust for him. Then he brought them to his lips. “As sweet as I remember. *Perfect*.”

I could only agree. But I meant the sight of him, of this strong muscled man peering down at my body as if it was a revelation.

He moved down until his face hovered right over my pussy. Last time, it had made me feel insecure because I hadn’t known what to expect. Now it made me feel nervous for another reason. “What if I don’t… come again?” The last two words were whispered. Cassio had spent fifteen minutes between my legs on our wedding night, and while it had been pleasurable, I hadn’t been close to orgasm.

He lowered himself to his elbows then slid his palms under my thighs. He cupped my ass cheeks, startling me. Tearing his eyes away from my center, he looked at me, and the hunger on his face alone almost made me come. “Don’t think about it. Just relax and let me get you there. Don’t rush it. Just let it happen.” Then he jerked me toward his waiting mouth and… holy hell, pretty much French kissed my pussy. I arched up, and let out an embarrassingly loud moan. I snapped my mouth shut, remembering the kids.

“Sorry.”

“The walls are thick and our room is at the other end of the corridor. Don’t worry,” he rasped as he rubbed his stubble over the soft skin of my inner thigh. His lips and chin were shiny. I could not stop looking. Shouldn’t I have closed my eyes or stared at the ceiling? Wasn’t that what women were supposed to do?

Cassio dragged his tongue along my slit, holding my gaze, and I felt that too. I clutched his hair, holding him in place even if he didn’t look like he had any intention of going anywhere. He ate me like I was his last meal.

“Do you enjoy it?” he rasped in between swipes of his tongue.

“Yes,” I whispered. This was already so much better than last time. Maybe because the pressure had lifted off my shoulders—I didn’t care. “And you?” Gasp. “Do you enjoy it?” Where had this daring, sexual creature hidden all my life?

Cassio smiled darkly, not appearing as if he minded. He squeezed my ass hard and lifted me higher as he wedged his shoulders against my thighs so my pussy was practically smothering him. My useless legs rested on his back. “I enjoy it very much. Your taste.” He dipped his tongue into me, and

I moaned. “Your moans.” He raised his head. “The sight of your pretty pussy. So fucking pretty.”

He lowered his head, and I watched as his mouth closed over me. His eyes burned into me as he sucked lightly at first then firmer, sending shockwave after shockwave to my center. I was getting closer and closer, always on the edge but not ready to fall yet. I dug my hand into the blanket, desperate for release and so close, but something was still holding me back. As if a knot had been tied too tightly deep inside of me and couldn’t unfurl. “Please,” I bit out.

Cassio pulled one of his hands out from beneath me. His fingertip brushed my entrance and at the next tug of his lips, he pressed inside. I clenched in discomfort then pleasure. Never taking his eyes off me, he started moving his finger inside of me as he sucked my clit. Suddenly the knot unraveled, my eyes growing wide, my belly hollowing as pleasure radiated through me. I cried out, my fingers scraping over Cassio’s head as I ground myself against his mouth, seeking more of his tongue and the finger teasing my sensitive inner walls. I half sobbed, half choked, squirming under Cassio from the force of the sensation. I’d touched and even fingered myself out of curiosity, but the result had never been more than mildly satisfying. This was mind-blowingly amazing.

“Goddammit it, yes, just like that, honey,” he growled, and I almost came again. Had he just called me honey?

Cassio raised his head, looking disheveled and glistening from my desire. He kept pumping his finger in and out of me, which felt wondrous and as if he was trying to unravel another tighter knot I hadn’t even known was there. This time it wasn’t blood trickling out of me. I didn’t have time for embarrassment over my arousal because I was steering toward another release.

Cassio added a second finger, and while I winced initially, the sensation soon became increasingly good. I moved my hips in rhythm with his pumping. Cassio massaged my ass cheek with his big hand as he watched his fingers slide into me. “So pretty,” he growled.

My inner walls spasmed, but before I could come, Cassio withdrew his fingers.

I sucked in a breath. “I want to come.”

Cassio smiled darkly as he pushed up to his elbows before he shoved down his pajama bottoms. “You will, with my cock inside of you.”

He parted my legs and knelt between them. Bracing himself on one muscled arm, he grabbed his erection and ran the tip along my slit. I gasped at the firm pressure against my clit. Mesmerized by the sight of the thick red head gliding over me, covered in my juices, I got up on my elbows to get a better view.

Cassio's gaze cut to me. First with confusion then with realization. He groaned, and his cock gave a little twitch. "Fuck." He swallowed hard. "You want to watch how my cock gives you what your pussy needs?"

I nodded because my mouth had become dry. He grabbed a pillow and pushed it under my ass, alleviating me so I could see myself. He looked down too and guided his thick tip to my lips. He rubbed it up and down slowly, his breathing deepening like mine. It was such a strange sight. Cassio's strong hand on his long shaft glistening with my lust as he rubbed over me. I was getting closer again, the knot deep inside of me trying to unravel.

Cassio brought his tip to my opening and pushed in a bit. I clenched at the intrusion, even as my body begged for more. Watching me, Cassio licked his thumb and pressed it down on my clit, beginning to draw small circles as he began to thrust into me with shallow, gentle thrusts.

There was a small scar on the thumb stroking me. Round and round his finger swirled, tugging at that knot inside my core. My gaze dipped lower to where Cassio's cock sank into my pussy. He was halfway in by now and pushed deeper with every new thrust until finally he filled me completely. Without thinking, I grabbed his firm ass, feeling it flex with every thrust. The feel of it and the sight of this primal act, of Cassio's pelvis pressing up to mine, his hips parting me for him, his abs tensing, and the harsh lust on his gorgeous face blasted my knot to shreds. I cried out as pleasure radiated through me with a force that had me clench so tightly that Cassio exhaled sharply from my pussy's grip on him. He slammed harder into me as I sunk my nails into his backside, lifting my hips almost frantically to meet his thrusts. Cassio gripped my hips in a bruising hold, jerking me faster against him until the slapping of our bodies and his grunts filled the room as he pounded into me. Soreness thrummed through me, battling with the low hum of pleasure.

Cassio fell forward, bracing himself on one elbow. He gripped my leg, pushed it up, and drove harder into me. I gasped then moaned. His eyes burned into me as he breathed harshly. His moves became uncoordinated,

his eyes wild. I held onto his back desperately, overwhelmed by the sensations of pain and pleasure, by the feel of his heavy weight pressing me into the bed, by the scent of our mingled sweat and sex.

"Who's fucking you?"

I panted, confused by his question.

"Who?" he growled, accentuating the word with a hard thrust that hit a delicious spot deep inside of me.

My eyes almost rolled back at the sensation. "You," I said. "You, Cassio."

"*Yes*." He thrust harder, and then he tensed with a sharp exhale. I, too, froze at the feeling of utter fullness, not sure if I was going to come apart at the seams or have another orgasm. I felt his release deep inside of me and moaned. This felt so good. Cassio kissed my mouth, then my throat, panting. "Yes, you are mine, honey. Your body but most importantly that pretty head." He pressed a kiss to my temple then rolled off me and onto his back.

I tried to catch my breath and make sense of his words. Tilting my head to the side, I watched him. His body glistened with sweat, and the hairs on his strong thighs were smeared with sweat and our releases. He stared up at the ceiling, chest heaving.

We weren't touching anymore and slowly a wall came up—we became strangers once more. I touched my abdomen, relishing in the afterglow of his presence.

"Did I go too hard? I didn't mean to take you like this so shortly after your first night."

I looked at him. The hint of concern in his gruff voice warmed my heart in a way I couldn't explain. "No. I'm fine." I smiled. "I really enjoyed it."

Cassio let out a short laugh. "I could tell." He shook his head as if this was an impossibility. He shifted to his side and ran his palm along my side then swiped his thumb over my nipple. "Why would such a lovely girl want to have an old cruel man?" He'd said it sarcastically, but I caught the underlying truth.

I huffed. "You aren't an old man." I didn't mention his cruelness. I didn't know him well enough to give a testament to that. "And you are sexy."

He chuckled, his eyes taking in my face. Slowly the smile disappeared, and he pulled his hand away. I didn't want us to become strangers again.

Why could strangers be close during sex, feel connected, even cared for, when right after nothing was between them? I wanted that feeling of connection all the time. I rolled over, closer to Cassio and pressed my palm to his chest then slowly let it glide lower, down his ripped stomach, following the trail of hair to his pelvis until my fingertips brushed his base.

Cassio let out a low groan that might have been on the verge of laughter. “I don’t have the virility of a teenage boy, Giulia.”

I looked up. His expression contradicted his words, and so did his half-erect cock. “To me, it looks like you’re virile enough,” I said teasingly. That barrier that he’d begun building between us mere seconds ago, I could feel it crumpling again. Emboldened, I touched him. His stomach hollowed with a deep breath, those delicious abs becoming more prominent.

He regarded me, one arm behind his head, with an expression as if he couldn’t make sense of me. I pushed up and straddled his thigh, delirious with the way he admired my body. His strong hairy thigh pressed up to my still sensitive center, and I ground myself against him, biting my lip at the sensation.

Cassio shook his head slowly, disbelievingly, but the look in his eyes spurred me on. I curled my fingers around his base, feeling him fill with blood under my touch.

Cassio didn’t want to relinquish control, but I wanted him to, wanted to see him give it up and hand it over to me, at least for a moment. I bent down and took his tip into my mouth. He hissed through his teeth and cupped the back of my head, his fingers raking through my hair. As with everything else, I’d done my research on this matter. The internet offered endless possibilities for the curious mind. I hollowed my cheeks as I sucked him lightly, trying to accommodate his girth in my mouth as my hand worked his base. It was still more fumbling than practiced moves, but it got the desired results. Cassio panted, his hips shifting, his fingers flexing against my scalp. I cast my eyes up, finding him watching, his expression gloriously unguarded. Yes.

Something shifted. His fingers tightened in my hair, not tugging but close to it, as he guided my head down. His hips thrust up. He was taking his control back. I yielded to his pumps, taking as much of him as he demanded, his hand firm on my head. He didn’t go deep, never once hitting my throat, perfectly controlled. At every upward thrust, I ground myself against his thigh, seeking my own satisfaction. I wasn’t sure why I didn’t

feel self-conscious. There wasn't room for it. I was too aroused, too drunk on Cassio's hungry expression. "Enough," he growled. He grabbed my hips and hoisted me on top of him. I didn't have time to get my bearings before he pulled me down onto his length.

If I'd thought sitting on top of Cassio would allow me control, I'd been sorely mistaken. Cassio played me like a master controlled his puppet. His hands clamping down on my hips, he held me fast as he slammed into me from below, forcing me to take whatever he gave. Every thrust hit deeper than before, nudging a point I hadn't known existed. I gave up my fight for control, surrendered to Cassio's demands. Today he'd get this. There was still tomorrow.

I lay awake long after Giulia had fallen asleep, curled up on her side, facing me. This time she'd accepted it quietly when I'd pulled back after sex to sleep. I could still feel her warmth, smell her sweet scent, sense her closeness, and briefly, I considered pulling her toward me. Instead I stared up into the dark. Giulia had surprised me again today, in more regards than one. She was stubborn and kind. She stood up for herself without being bitchy.

And the sex… that had caught me completely off guard. I'd expected her to avoid the physical aspect of our marriage as long as possible until I eventually approached her because my desire couldn't be suppressed anymore. I didn't want to cheat, and I wouldn't. The clusterfuck with Gaia… it had ruined everything. I didn't want something like that to happen again and it wouldn't.

I would *not* allow it.

I didn’t know Giulia, and she didn’t know me, but in bed, we worked well together. When she’d finally come for the first time, it was the sweetest triumph I could imagine.

Eating her sweet pussy was wonderful and rewarding in its own way. Gaia hadn’t wanted me to do it to her, so I hadn’t. Giulia was the first woman I’d gone down on in almost ten years, and I promised myself to eat her every goddamn night if she let me. In the short time of our marriage, I already felt younger. These last few months I’d felt old beyond my age, exhausted and wary. This exhilaration of the beginning would fade though. It was an illusion I couldn’t entertain.

As if to remind me of that irrefutable fact, Simona’s cry blared through the baby monitor, destroying any hope of falling asleep soon.

Giulia stirred beside me, a soft groan slipping out of those sweet lips. I turned the lights on and sat up. Another sleepless night.

Giulia blinked against the brightness, obviously disoriented. “What’s going on?”

“Simona wants the bottle.”

Giulia nodded slowly and slipped out of bed. I stood as well.

“You can sleep. I can handle it. I know you have to work tomorrow.”

I paused, watching as she slipped out of our bedroom. After a moment, I followed. Giulia didn’t have experience with children as had become apparent last night. I wasn’t sure she could handle Simona. Especially at night, my daughter was demanding and her cries absolutely nerve-racking. Had Giulia the necessary calm to handle her?

I didn’t think she’d ever hurt my children, she didn’t seem the type, but she was young. Feeling overwhelmed could be dangerous.

Simona’s cries didn’t stop, but they lessened in intensity. I hovered in the doorway to her room, stunned by what I saw. Giulia had bought a sort of baby sling that allowed her to carry Simona against her chest and was currently trying to close it in her back. It was obviously the first time she tried to do it. I walked toward her and helped her. I’d never seen such a thing, so it took us a couple of tries to close it.

“Thank you,” Giulia said. “I bought this today. The saleslady told me that it helps calm babies, so I thought I’d give it a try. It allows the child to feel connected to their mother…” She trailed off.

Simona peered up at me, her head resting against Giulia’s chest.

“Let’s get you something to eat, all right?” Giulia said softly and stroked Simona’s head. Then she smiled at me. “You can go back to sleep. My hands are free to prepare the bottle. See?” She raised her hands.

I nodded slowly. Giulia pressed her palm against Simona’s butt and headed into the corridor, all the while talking quietly to my daughter whose cries became less frequent. I kept following them downstairs. The dog trotted after us into the kitchen and sat down beside Giulia when she began preparing the bottle. She swayed gently from side to side, humming, which seemed to have a calming effect on Simona, even if she still whined occasionally.

Giulia threw a glance over her shoulder at me. “You don’t trust me to handle it yet, right?” She didn’t sound angry, only resigned.

“It’s not a matter of trust.” But it was. I’d never been very trusting, and now my capacity for it was almost completely exploited.

Giulia’s smile was sad. “It’s okay. They are your whole world. You want to protect them.” She tested the temperature of the milk then opened one strap of the sling so she could give the bottle to Simona who latched onto it at once. “I’m going to do my best to take care of them.”

I believed her.

Together, we walked back upstairs. I noticed the open door to Gaia’s old bedroom. Giulia followed my gaze. “Simona and I are fine, really.”

I headed to the bedroom. As expected, Daniele lay curled up on the covers of the bed in a new pajama set with Superman signs all over it. My heart felt heavy seeing his small form. Whenever I looked at this bed, all I saw was blood, but he sought comfort here. I picked him up. He snuggled against my warmth, and I held him tighter. I wished he’d allow this closeness when he was awake too, like he used to do in the past. I took him to bed before I went to Simona’s nursery once more. Giulia sat in the rocking chair and fed Simona.

Her expression became stern when she spotted me in the doorway. “Go to bed, Cassio. I mean it. I can handle this.”

I retreated slowly and went to bed. It didn’t take long before I fell asleep. I only woke briefly when Giulia crept back into bed later, but I wasn’t sure what time it was. She lay down so close to me that I could feel her warmth, but I didn’t mind. I was already drifting off again when her fingertips lightly brushed my hand.

Simona had woken one more time, but Giulia insisted I stay in bed as she took care of it.

Maybe that was why I felt more relaxed this morning than I'd felt in a long time. Despite her lack of sleep, Giulia got up once I was done in the bathroom and slipped in herself.

I went into Daniele's room. He was awake, as usual at this time, already bent over his tablet. In the beginning I'd hide it from him, but when he played with that thing, it was the only time he looked even remotely happy, so I always gave it back to him. He didn't look up when I entered, but his little shoulders hunched. I got down on my haunches beside his bed to be eye level with him. Still nothing.

"Daniele, come on. Put that aside." No reaction. I took it away, and he started screaming, but I put it up on a shelf. I picked him up despite his struggling. His refusal to be close to me cut worse than those whips had many years ago.

I swallowed and put him down on the changing table. It was our ritual that I woke him. It had been like this since he was very small. He always loved our morning time… not anymore.

His teary eyes slanted to something behind me. I turned, finding Giulia in the doorway, her eyes full of emotion and the dog on her arm.

She came inside. "Loulou heard you crying and came up to check on you."

Daniele quieted, regarding the dog with big eyes.

Giulia stopped beside the changing table so the dog could look down at Daniele and Daniele up at it. I undressed him and for once he didn't fight. His wide eyes were fixated on the dog as I changed his diaper. Giulia took clothes out of the wardrobe and put them down beside me. Jeans, socks that looked like sneakers, and a sweater with the words "Big brother."

"You get to wear your big brother shirt today," she said, grinning.

Daniele's mouth trembled into a small smile, and I had to look away for a moment. Clearing my throat, I said, "You are a good big brother. Simona needs you at her side."

Daniele nodded slowly and let me put the clothes on. He could dress himself, more or less, but as with so many other things, he refused to do it since his mother's death. I lifted him off the table but didn't put him down so he could walk as I usually would have done. I pressed him to my body. His eyes remained on Loulou, but at least he didn't try to squirm away from me.

"Let's check on Simona," I said.

We headed into Simona's room together, and Giulia set Loulou down so she could pick up Simona. The dog trotted out of the room to do whatever it had in mind, probably pee on the expensive rugs. The moment it was out of sight, Daniele became restless. I lowered him to the floor before he could start to cry. He immediately walked away, probably to go in search of his tablet. Giulia held Simona but looked at me. The compassion in her expression didn't infuriate me this morning. It only made me feel wistful. With Simona on her arm, she came over to me and touched my chest. "He'll come around. Give it time. It takes time to heal."

Would she be as optimistic if she knew what had happened?

I glanced down at my watch. "I need to go now." Then, and I wasn't sure why I cupped her cheek and pressed a light kiss to her mouth. "I appreciate your efforts."

Surprise crossed her face. The same surprise I felt since minute one of our marriage. She wasn't anything like I expected. She could have given in to teenage hysterics, but instead she tried to handle the tasks of her new life.

She handled them in a kind and lovely way. She seemed too good to be true.

I pulled back and went downstairs. Elia waited for me in front of my car to get further instructions. Remembering last night and this morning, a hint of reluctance filled me when I thought about my arrangement with Elia, but it wasn't enough to make me abandon the matter. Giulia had done nothing to deserve this, but I needed certainty before her loveliness had me wrapped around her finger and made me blind to a hurtful truth.

My kids wouldn't survive a repeat performance of their mother's demise.

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THIRTEEN

My chest ached thinking of Cassio's morning encounter with Daniele. I could tell that Cassio hurt because of his son's reaction to him. I needed to help somehow, but first I needed to figure out why Daniele acted the way he did. For some reason, I couldn't imagine that Cassio had hurt his son in any way. Cassio was certainly capable of the most depraved acts imaginable. The rumors of his business practices had reached even my ears in Baltimore, but the way he looked at his children, it was clear he loved them. No, it was something else between them. I had a feeling it had something to do with Gaia, which was a problem because Cassio refused to talk about her. Daniele didn't speak at all, and I wasn't sure if it was wise to mention his mother around him. I made my way into the kitchen with Simona in my arms and Daniele tiptoeing after me. His face was tear-stained because he couldn't find his tablet. I'd seen it up on the shelf in his room, but decided not to give it to him. He needed to learn to be without that thing. It wasn't healthy how fixated he was on technology.

Sybil was already making waffles. The kitchen smelled of vanilla and warm dough.

Elia and Domenico weren't there yet, but I knew they were somewhere in the house or Cassio wouldn't have left. Loulou slipped under the table, probably hoping for a repeat performance, but sweets definitely weren't good for a dog. I approached Sybil as Daniele knelt in front of the table to

watch Loulou. “Let her come to you, Daniele. She’s shy. Eventually, she’ll come. Give her time, okay?”

He nodded absentmindedly, but didn’t move otherwise.

“Can you cook some bacon as well?”

“For the dog?” Sybil guessed.

“I don’t want to force him to eat. Not when he doesn’t trust me yet. This is the only way he’ll have breakfast.”

She nodded. She still didn’t look as if she approved, but she took bacon from the fridge.

“Thank you.”

Elia soon joined us, but Domenico stayed away. To my surprise, he sat down beside me. Like yesterday, his smile was quick, his eye contact a bit too intimate, and his arm brushed mine twice “by accident.”

I wasn’t the only one who noticed because Sybil sent him a sharp look.

I ignored it, unsure what else to do. My plan to get Daniele to eat worked like it had yesterday. Loulou got a tiny piece of bacon for every bite of waffle and banana that Daniele ate. It was a win-win situation as far as I was concerned, and Loulou definitely agreed.

“I thought we could all go for a walk together, so Loulou gets to see something new?” I said to Daniele. His nod was quick and his obvious excitement kindled my own.

“That sounds good. The weather is nice and it’s not too cold. I know a nice park not too far away,” Elia said.

“Great.” I got up. “Why don’t you go ahead and prepare everything while I have a word with Sybil.”

Elia glanced between Sybil and me before he rose and left.

Taking the dishes to the sink where Sybil was scrubbing the pan, I said, “You worked here from day one of Cassio’s marriage to Gaia, right?” I said in a low voice so the children wouldn’t hear me. I didn’t know it for a fact, but the look on Sybil’s face confirmed my assumption.

“I did.”

She avoided my eyes by putting the dishes into the dishwasher.

“How was she?”

My parents had met her at official functions, of course. She’d been a lady, always perfectly styled, but that didn’t mean anything. Outward appearances and what went on behind closed doors were two very different things. “I only worked for her. I didn’t know her.”

I gave her a disbelieving look. “How can you work for someone for years and not know them?”

Sybil closed the dishwasher then busied herself with wiping the counters. “She kept her distance. She never had breakfast in the kitchen. She preferred me to get my tasks done as quickly as possible so I could leave.” She shook her head. “If you want to know more, you’ll have to talk to the master. But I don’t think you should.”

With Simona strapped to my front and Daniele in his buggy, we strolled through the park toward a fenced-in dog area. Domenico kept his distance, pretending he was a casual walker, but Elia stayed at my side. For an outsider, it looked as if we were a couple. Elia definitely played that card, considering how close he walked beside me. Loulou dashed off the moment I unleashed her and soon chased around with other dogs.

“Must be strange,” Elia began, sitting down beside me on the bench. “To live in a foreign city with a man you hardly know.”

Daniele followed the playing dogs with his eyes. That fascinated look usually only managed to appear on his face when he stared at the screen. Simona, too, watched with big eyes.

“I’ve been prepared for that kind of life since I was a little girl. The rules in our world have been the same for a long time.”

“They are, but that doesn’t mean it’s always easy to stick to them.”

I turned to Elia. The way he looked at me, like he wanted to see what it would take to get a rise out of me, raised my protective walls. “Do you make a habit of breaking the rules?”

He smiled as if he was going to tell me a secret. “It can be freeing.”

He was flirting with me. Loulou yelped then squeaked. My head jerked around. A bigger dog was trying to mount her. “Can you help her?”

Elia didn’t hesitate. He jumped up and jogged toward the two dogs. The owner of the other dog, a young man with glasses and a hipster beard did the same. They managed to separate the dogs. To my surprise, they began to chat.

Elia smiled the same smile he'd given me all day, but this was less expectant, less challenging. It was naturally flirtatious, one he didn't have to force. The hipster guy laughed, still holding his small bulldog by the collar. Elia grinned, but then he noticed my gaze and his demeanor shifted. He said something else then hurried back to me with Loulou on his arm.

I searched his face. For a moment, back there, he'd looked like I'd caught him. Maybe Elia was breaking the rules, but not in a way he'd insinuated to me. Now it made sense why Cassio had chosen such an attractive man to guard me. Elia wasn't a danger in his eyes. I could probably parade around naked all day and Elia wouldn't care in the slightest.

We returned home much earlier than planned because Simona had a never-ending crying fit. She wouldn't let me calm her no matter what I did. Daniele, too, got cranky because of it, but Loulou's presence prevented his meltdown at least. When I finally managed to have Simona settle down for a nap after what felt like hours, I felt drained. I'd considered calling Cassio to ask for his help because unlike Daniele, Simona quieted as soon as her dad was close. Now I was glad that I managed without calling him.

I didn't want him to think I couldn't handle the situation. My clothes were drenched with sweat when I sank down on the sofa minutes after Simona had fallen asleep. Daniele sat on the floor, his tablet on his lap. I'd given in and returned it to him. If he also had started wailing like Simona, I would have started crying too.

Elia came toward me, carrying two cups. "You look like you need a coffee."

"I need a drink and a shower." Despite my lack of experience with alcohol, I suddenly got why people craved a drink after days like this.

He laughed then handed me the cup. "Coffee is a start, don't you think?"

He sat down beside me, again closer than was appropriate. This time it didn't bother me because now I knew the truth. I took a sip of the black coffee. Usually I drank mine with milk and sugar, but this felt good now. I regarded Elia openly, not even bothering to hide my attention. He wore a tight white shirt that accentuated his muscles and a black gun holster over it. I wondered if he was good with weapons, if that was at least part of the reason why Cassio had chosen him—or maybe his presence was only as a trap.

Cassio had set Elia up to do this. I had no doubt about it. Cassio was jealous. He had admitted it himself, and Faro and Mansueto had confirmed it too. I hadn't expected him to be jealous enough to trick me like that, though. It infuriated me, but beyond that, it made me really sad. If Cassio trusted me this little, we had a long way to go for this marriage to work.

I set the cup down on the table then faced Elia. I leaned closer, gauging his reaction. "I've been asking myself a question…"

His eyes shifted to caution, but the smile remained plastered on his face

"Does Cassio know?" I murmured.

His smile became less honest. "Know what?"

"That you like men."

For an instant, Elia's expression slipped before he could control it again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "I saw how you checked out that guy in the dog park. You were flirting with him like you've been pretending to flirt with me. I'm not blind. Maybe the men in our world don't notice because they prefer to see what they want to see, but I don't care if you like men or women. Love is love."

Elia shook his head. "I didn't check anyone out. You can't go around saying something like that. You know what would happen to me if those rumors spread."

"I have absolutely no intention of telling anyone. It's your personal business," I said. Officially, there weren't any gay Made Men. It was ridiculous. Boys learned to hide it if they liked other boys or they got killed. That was the only reason why there weren't any gay men in our circles. "But Cassio knows."

I could practically see Elia's thoughts racing as he tried to get me off track. "If he thought I was gay, he'd kill me. The mafia doesn't tolerate fags."

I smiled. The insult was a nice touch. It didn't work. "No, unless you don't make it public. And sometimes it comes in handy to have gay soldiers, especially if someone's as jealous as Cassio seems to be."

Elia didn't say anything. I could see that he was completely thrown off. "This is—"

"Ridiculous? Yes, it is. Did Cassio ask you to come on to me to see if I would bite?"

Elia ran his hand through his hair. I'd backed him into a corner. It was obvious that neither he nor Cassio had expected me to catch onto them. This made me even more furious than the fact that they'd tried this trick at all.

"I'm your bodyguard. I'm meant to protect you. You should talk to Cassio if you think I'm doing a bad job."

I rolled my eyes. "Maybe you should go to the staff room now. I really don't feel like being lied to at the moment."

Elia inclined his head and left. He'd call Cassio the second he was in the back room. I leaned back against the headrest, closing my eyes briefly, feeling drained. My shirt stuck to my sweaty back. A hot snout nudged my arm. I opened my eyes to find Loulou on the couch beside me. Was she trying to console me? I'd read that dogs could pick up on human emotions, but I hadn't expected Loulou to act on it.

She probably wasn't allowed on the sofa, but I didn't care if Cassio would approve or not. I patted my lap and she curled up there.

Daniele put down his tablet and approached me. He climbed on the sofa and sat beside me. His little legs didn't even reach the edge. I smiled at him. His eyes conveyed questions that he didn't voice.

"I'm fine, just tired. Loulou is trying to console me because she can feel that I'm tired."

Daniele nodded slowly. I stroked his head carefully, seeing if he'd pull back, but he didn't. I felt the knots at his back. I'd seen how he struggled when Sybil or Cassio tried to comb his hair. From the way it felt, I doubted combing would work. "Loulou looks cute with her short hair, right?"

Daniele gave a nod.

"Will you let me cut your hair a bit? Not much, just a bit, so Loulou doesn't feel alone with her short hair?"

An even smaller nod was his response. I gently put Loulou down on the sofa and went to get the scissors. When I returned, Loulou was curled up on the sofa and Daniele was sitting very close, but he wasn't touching her even though I could see that he wanted to.

"Can you sit on my lap while I cut your hair?"

Nod.

I lifted Daniele and positioned him on my knee as I sat down. I stroked his head gently before I began to cut the hair at the back of his head. He didn't move, only looked at Loulou. I shortened the hair on the sides too, only left the hair on top as it was. "You look really cool now."

Daniele remained seated on my leg, and I kept stroking his little head.

“I hope you’ll talk to me one day. I’d love to hear your voice. You can talk to me about everything. I can keep secrets if you need me to. Okay?”

He looked over his shoulder, really looked me in the eye, and in that moment, he seemed so much older than almost three. “Your dad loves you.”

Daniele looked away and slid off my leg. He sank down on the floor with his tablet once more.

Cassio wasn’t home in time for dinner. It was a little past eight when I settled in the comfortable armchair in front of the fireplace in the living room, reading one of my favorite books. I’d considered doing Pilates or finishing my recent painting, but then I hadn’t found the energy to do it. My phone lay on the small side table, hoping for a message from Cassio. Friends from school had messaged me, but I could already feel that our friendship wouldn’t survive the distance. We’d never been the close friends you shared your darkest secrets with anyway. Maybe I should send Cassio a text to ask when he’d be home, but even though I had his number, we hadn’t texted yet. I’d considered sending him a photo from the dog park, but never did it.

An idea crossed my mind. I got up and went over to the liquor cabinet to the left of the marble fireplace. It was filled with several bottles of scotch, gin, bourbon, and all kinds of other spirits I didn’t know the first thing about. Remembering Cassio’s words that I wasn’t supposed to drink, I picked the most expensive looking scotch bottle with a name I couldn’t even begin to pronounce: Laphroaig, a limited edition. I poured myself a generous amount and took it back to the chair with me. Settling back down, I took a whiff and coughed, surprised at the smoky aroma of the alcohol. I sipped at it then coughed even harder, tears springing into my eyes. “Oh God.”

Why would anyone drink this by choice? Maybe it was a man thing. After I’d composed myself, I took my phone, lifted the tumbler to my lips, smiled challengingly and took a selfie. I sent it off to Cassio.

Laphroaig is keeping me company while you work

He saw my message almost instantly. He didn’t reply.

Annoyed, I set the tumbler and my phone back down.

Fifteen minutes later, the front door opened and closed. Loulou, who’d been curled up in her basket, stormed into the lobby, followed by Cassio’s disapproving voice.

“Loulou!” I called, grabbing the tumbler and taking another bigger sip. Loulou trotted into the living room and curled up in her basket once more. I quickly tossed my legs over the armrest, so Cassio would see my over-the-knee socks he hated so much. Then Cassio appeared in the doorway, dark and imposing, looking every bit the deadly businessman he was. He scanned me from head to toe, lingering on the glass still pressed to my lips, my flowery overall dress, and the black socks.

His anger was quick, morphing his face into a mask of even sharper edges. Briefly, my stomach clenched with fear, with the knowledge that I didn’t know anything about Gaia’s death, but I didn’t allow this emotion to take over. Cassio hadn’t done anything to me. Still, when he shut the door, my adrenaline spiked. He prowled toward me, but I didn’t move and took another sip from the whisky. It burned a trail down my throat, and heat began to bloom in my belly—not only from the alcohol. Something about the primal disapproval in Cassio’s face awakened my body in ways I couldn’t use right now. We had to talk about Elia, and I wouldn’t let sex get in the way of it.

“I don’t have time for games, Giulia. Was that photo meant to provoke me?” He stopped right in front of the armchair, tall and foreboding. He looked breathtaking and terrifying.

“No,” I said lightly. “I only wanted to keep you updated on my evening activities, considering how eager you are to control every aspect of my life.”

He bent over me, his muscled arms braced on the armrests. The expensive fabric of his jacket brushed my calves, and the friction, albeit distant, sent a thrill through me. Maybe it was the alcohol that made me so sensible to Cassio’s aura. He oozed dominance and primal sexiness. His eyes slid over my crossed legs, lingering on the sliver of naked skin on my upper thighs. Then he cast his gaze up. I swallowed at the intensity of his expression, as if he wasn’t sure if he wanted to devour me or spank me. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Elia. Don’t tell me he didn’t call you today. I bet you expect status updates on his mission every hour.”

His strong palm had somehow found its way onto the small patch of naked skin between the hem of my skirt and my over-the-knee socks. I felt the touch between my legs, wanted his fingers to move higher, but I reined myself in. He took the glass from me and downed the whisky. “I told you I don’t want you to drink hard liquor.”

“Because I’m not old enough.”

Cassio set the glass down on the table, leaning even closer. “Giulia.” The word was a low growl, full of warning. I didn’t care. His hand slipped higher on my leg, under my skirt, and his lips crashed down on mine. For an instant my body arched toward him, eager for the touch, the kiss, and what it promised. But I wasn’t going to let Cassio distract me with angry sex no matter how desperately my body wanted him. I pushed against his chest, ripping my mouth away from his. “No. *Stop*.”

Cassio’s fingers brushed my panties, soaked from our argument. He groaned. “What are you doing to me?”

Me? What *I* was doing?

I pressed harder against him. “Cassio, stop.”

His eyes focused on me and his expression smoothed, becoming guarded and aloof. He straightened, robbing me of his warmth, his touch, his scent. “We need to talk about Elia,” I got out.

Cassio stepped back and brushed out the crinkles in his jacket as if nothing had happened. “There’s nothing to talk about. You let your imagination run free.”

Anger coursed through me. I swung my legs down and pushed to my feet. Since he was more than a head taller, that didn’t really have the effect that I wanted. “Just how stupid do you take me for?”

Cassio raised his brows. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I snorted, remembering Elia’s exact same words.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about Cassio, because the moment I confronted Elia, he called you.”

Cassio’s face remained a mask of stoic calmness, and it infuriated me even more.

“You’re being unreasonable and childish.”

Whenever I tried to talk to him or have him relinquish control, he accused me of being a child. But when he wanted to sleep with me, that fact

didn’t cross his mind.

“As your wife, I deserve the truth. I don’t deserve being tricked and spied on. What was the purpose of this charade? Did you think I’d throw myself at the first attractive man who smiled at me?”

Cassio narrowed his eyes. “So, you find him attractive.”

I had enough. I walked up to him and glared up. “Are you serious?”

Cassio didn’t deign me with a reply. He unbuttoned his shirt with infuriating nonchalance.

“Look at me.”

He raised his head, but his eyes were hard. No sign of guilt. Did he think his actions were okay?

“I can’t believe you used Elia as a trap to see if I’d cheat on you. We’re married.”

“Marriage never stopped anyone.”

“Is that so?” I asked curiously, trying to figure out if he was referring to himself.

“I’d never cheat.”

“Oh, so I’m supposed to take your word on it, but you can use my bodyguard to test me? Don’t you realize how wrong that is?”

“I do what’s necessary.”

“Necessary? So, you admit that you ordered Elia to flirt with me to see how I’d react? You should trust me.” Hurt rang in my voice.

“I don’t trust anyone.”

My first impulse was to react with anger, with a snappy comment because this day had been hard and I didn’t have a shoulder to unload on, only a husband who treated me like a child and didn’t trust me. But my anger wouldn’t change anything. It would only lead to more resentment. “I don’t know what happened between Gaia and you. Maybe you worry I’m like her. I don’t know her so I can’t promise you I’m not. What I know is that if you don’t allow yourself to get to know me, you won’t ever trust me, and if you don’t trust me, then this marriage will fail either way.” I swallowed, turning away from his harsh expression. “Maybe you need more time. You obviously don’t want my closeness except for when we have sex. I won’t push you, but I’m not sure I can do this. Not right now. I’ll give you the room you need and move into the bedroom beside Simona’s nursery. That way you’ll have the bed for yourself.”

Giulia walked out of the living room. I was frozen, not because Giulia had caught onto Elia. No, because she wanted to move out of our bedroom. This time it was definitely my fault. I hadn’t fought Gaia when she’d insisted on her own room many years ago. I’d accepted it. I wouldn’t make the same mistake, not only because I feared a repeat performance. I wanted Giulia in my bed, close to me.

I chased her and caught up with her on the staircase. Cupping her elbow, I turned her around to me. She almost lost her balance and had to grab on to my shoulders to steady herself. Her eyes swam with tears. This was at least the third time I made my young wife cry. Marriage wasn’t the place for cruelty. That was what Father had said, and I’d been certain I wasn’t guilty of it. Yet cruelty came in different shapes and forms. Giulia had done nothing to deserve my suspicion, my coldness, and yet she’d been punished for another’s crime.

“I won’t let you move out of our bedroom, Giulia. You’ll stay.”

Giulia searched my face. “Why? You don’t even want to hold me at night.”

Fuck. The look of hurt in her eyes made me long for those whips again. “Stay.” I cupped her cheek. She leaned into the touch. I brushed her cheekbone.

“Why?”

“Because I tell you to.”

She shook her head. “Give me another reason.”

“Because I want you close. Because I liked falling asleep with your strawberry scent at night.”

Her mouth twitched. “Strawberry scent?”

I bent down, pressing my face into the delicious spot where her throat met her shoulder, soaking in that sweet aroma before pressing a kiss to her skin. “Like a goddamn strawberry field. I don’t even like strawberries.”

She giggled, twitching under my mouth. “Who doesn’t like strawberries?”

“Me. They are false packaging. They promise sweetness, but most of the time they are sour and watery.”

Giulia tried to squirm away from my lips that I ran over her throat, relishing in her choked laughs. “Cassio, that’s tickling.”

I lifted my head.

Her eyes lit up with amusement, and just looking at her unguarded joy dispersed some of the heaviness from my soul.

“Nobody can resist a sweet strawberry.”

“Yeah,” I murmured. “I can see that.”

Giulia shook her head. “I can’t smell like strawberry. My shampoo is cherry.”

I chuckled. “It’s strawberry for me.”

“Sure. If you order the cherry to be a strawberry, that’s what it’ll be.”

I shut her up with a kiss, not the harsh ones beckoned by anger. A gentle kiss. She kept her eyes open, not letting me off the hook. “You want me close at night?”

“I do.”

“Okay.” No mind games, just a simple okay.

I lifted her into my arms and carried her upstairs.

“Cassio…”

“Shhh… we’ll talk afterward.” She didn’t argue. The moment I laid her down on the bed, she molded her body to mine. Would I ever tire of her scent and taste?

She was sprawled out on top of me afterward, my hands splayed out on her firm ass. Her bangs stuck to her sweaty forehead. “Now we talk,” she said when I hadn’t even caught my breath.

“Giulia—”

“You promised,” she said, and her eyes stopped any protest I might have had.

“I did.” She waited. For an admittance, for my plea of guilt. “You are right. I asked Elia to test your loyalty.”

Giulia pushed into a sitting position, straddling my stomach. I loved that she wasn’t shy about her body, and I loved admiring her. Her expression made it clear that she wasn’t trying to go for another round. She wanted the higher position to feel more in control. I’d give it to her. I grasped her hips, needing to touch her.

“Test my loyalty? You told another man to come on to me to see if I was willing to cheat.”

Bitterness twisted my thoughts. “I don’t trust anyone, not just you.”

“I’m your wife, Cassio. We have to trust each other. I don’t want us to be strangers living under one roof. I want this marriage to work, not just for us but for Simona and Daniele too. They need a happy family.”

“Happy family,” I repeated. My children had never experienced a happy family. For a while, Gaia and I had managed to hide our resentment for each other, but in the last couple of years, things had turned for the worst.

“I want that,” she whispered fiercely, lowering herself until her face hovered over mine.

“So do I,” I said. But I was a realist, and in a few years, Giulia would be too.

“But you don’t believe in it.”

Looking up into Giulia’s hopeful, kind face, I really wanted a happy family. “It’s not a matter of belief.”

“It is. If you don’t believe in it, if you don’t work for it, then it won’t become reality.”

I smiled wistfully, wondering if I’d ever been this optimistic.

“Don’t blame this on me being young,” she warned, eyes flashing with annoyance. “Being positive is not a trait of the young. You are being a grumpy old man by choice.”

A laugh burst out of me. Giulia smiled. Then she became unguardedly hopeful. “Cassio, I want to be happy. I want us all to be happy.”

“What do you want me to do?” I asked without thinking. Giulia was young. I wouldn’t be responsible for her unhappiness, at least not on purpose. I wasn’t really sure if I had a choice in the matter. With Gaia, I’d

thought I'd done everything I could to make her happy. In hindsight, it hadn't been enough, but I was up against an impossible challenge.

"Allow yourself to trust me."

I ran my palm up her back along the gentle bumps of her spine before cupping her head, pulling her down for a kiss. "I'll try."

"You could start by telling me what happened with Gaia, and why Daniele acts the way he does."

I shook my head. "That is the past, and it's got nothing to do with us."

Giulia smiled sadly. She knew as well as I did that it had everything to do with us, but the past with Gaia wasn't something I'd share with her. It wouldn't serve any purpose but to destroy whatever tentative bond that was forming between Giulia and me. She was young. Maybe that was why I was willing to try at all. I didn't want to be the one to destroy her loveliness.

"Okay." It wasn't. Giulia's body language made that clear.

"What else?"

"Spend time with the kids and me. Family time. Be home for dinner, be home on Sunday. I want to get to know you, what you like to do in your free time, what you enjoy doing."

I tried to remember the last time I'd done something I enjoyed doing that didn't involve my line of work. I couldn't.

"Don't tell me there's nothing you like to do except work. There must be something else you enjoy besides torture and killing."

So uninhibited with her words. It was a breath of fresh air. I hummed, cupping her head harder. "I'm good at both."

"I don't doubt it," she whispered, shivering. "I love to paint and do Pilates."

My fingers on her neck loosened. "Paint?"

"Yes, canvases. Still lifes, landscapes, animals. I'm not so good with the human body, but I'm trying to improve. That's what was in the huge package. My canvases."

I hadn't paid much attention to Giulia's belongings. Maybe I should have shown basic interest in my wife's life before I dragged her into the mess that was my own.

"And Pilates helps me stay fit, and it's good for my mental health too." She fell silent. "You look at me as if I'm talking nonsense."

"You're not," I said. "You just keep surprising me."

"In a good or bad way?"

“Good.”

She shrugged. “That’s good.”

It was. But good things always came with a price. “Have you painted since you’ve arrived here?”

“No, I was busy settling in, and the kids and Loulou keep me on my toes.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “And I’d need a room to paint. The fumes need to be contained.”

“There’s a vacant room beside my office. It’s got a nice view of the garden and direct access to the terrace.”

Giulia’s face lit up. She lowered herself and propped her chin up on her crossed arms on my chest. “Thank you.”

“How are things between you and my children?”

Her mouth thinned, but I wasn’t sure why. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, even though there obviously was. “The kids and I are getting to know each other. I think I can gain Daniele’s trust through Loulou, and today Simona let me carry her without crying.”

“About the dog—”

Giulia jerked into a sitting position again. “I don’t want to give Loulou away, and I won’t lock her inside a room. It’s not fair to her. What’s your problem with her anyway?”

“Apart from the fact that she’s not trained very well?”

“That’s hardly her fault. Did Gaia never work with her?”

I tensed. “The dog came at a difficult time.”

“I think Loulou is good for this family, and I really like her.”

“Then keep her, but train her.”

“Will Elia stay my bodyguard?”

“Of course, he’s a good choice.”

“Because he’s not interested in women.”

I narrowed my eyes, wondering how exactly she found out. She misunderstood my expression. Worry tightened her face. “You knew, right?”

“Of course, that’s why he’s allowed to be your bodyguard.”

Giulia huffed. “Trust?”

I smiled darkly then wet my thumb and pressed it to that little pink button, which teased me from its prime spot between those pouty lips.

“We’ll work toward that. But even if I trust you, that doesn’t mean I’ll trust any man around you.” I dipped my thumb between her folds, gathering

her wetness before I swiped it over her clit again.

Giulia leaned back, bracing herself with her hands against my thighs, giving me better access and a beautiful view. Her smile turned teasing when my cock brushed her lower back. “Not such an old man after all, hmm?”

I circled my thumb faster, enjoying how Giulia’s hips moved, chasing my finger. I was in my early thirties, definitely not old, even if I’d felt it in the last few months and especially in comparison to Giulia. “I’ve got a lot to make up for.”

Curiosity flickered in her gaze, making me regret my words. “Blow me,” I ordered before she could ask. She cocked an eyebrow, her mouth pursing in mock indignation. Fuck, she was too goddamn lovely.

“Tell me something you like to do first. A hobby.”

“Apart from eating your pussy?”

She shook her head, opening her mouth for an undoubtedly insolent comeback, but I grabbed her by her thighs and flipped her around. She cried out in surprise, her breath hot on my cock and her ass propped up in front of me. I slapped her ass cheek in warning then bit down. Giulia jerked with a choked gasp.

“I make the rules in this house, honey, especially in this bed.”

A shiver worked its way down her spine. I massaged her ass, enjoying the sight of her arousal.

She gripped my cock and sucked me sharply into her mouth, causing me to twitch up with a groan. As unexpectedly as she’d sucked me, she released me. “Tell me one thing,” she demanded softly before she sucked me deeply into her mouth again.

I squeezed her ass hard in warning. “Suck me. Don’t talk.” I drew her pussy lips into my mouth. Her moan vibrated against my balls before she sucked them into her mouth. “One thing.” She slipped her arm between our bodies. It brushed my chest then her fingers bumped against my chin. I pulled back to watch Giulia slide two fingers into herself. I almost came right then. Her tongue darted out, licking up my pre-cum.

“Quid pro quo.”

I chuckled then exhaled sharply as her teeth grazed the sensitive underside of my cock and her fingers kept pumping into her pussy.

“I used to play pool,” I growled. I was so desperate for her mouth, so desperate for her fingers to keep fucking that sweet pussy, I would have told her everything in that moment.

She threw a triumphant smile over her shoulder. I wouldn't have it. I pressed my mouth against her pussy, my tongue fighting her fingers for dominance. She moaned loudly, which died when I pushed her mouth back down on my cock, my fingers tangling in her silky hair. I thrust up, deeper than before. She struggled to take me in but didn't back down. Her fingers pumped into her pussy and my tongue teased them and her folds, her clit, every delicious inch I could reach. She started to spasm on top of me, moaning around my length. I kept thrusting into her mouth. I wanted to prolong this, but with her body coming apart on top of me, her fingers chasing her orgasm, her taste on my tongue, I couldn't hold back.

I tightened, my fingers on her neck twitching and my thrusts becoming jerky as I came harder than ever before. The feel of her hot mouth around my cock as she tried to swallow was perfection. Giulia slumped down on top of me, her fingers becoming slack, and I, too, lay drained on the mattress, my heart speeding in my chest. After a moment, Giulia pulled away and coughed.

Fuck. I'd held her down when I'd come in her mouth. I hadn't even asked if she was okay with it. I sat up slightly, but Giulia still only lay there with her cheek against my thigh, breathing hard. I brushed her hair to the side so I could see her face. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks red. "Are you all right?"

Her eyelids peeled open and the corner of her mouth drifted up. "Yeah, you?"

I stared at the girl on top of me, the woman, my wife, marveling at her strangeness. It wasn't something I'd ever appreciated, and yet here I was, unable to resist her body and charm. I rubbed my thumb across her ruby lips. She nicked my skin with her teeth and gave me a coy look. "You need to teach me how to play pool."

"I have a pool table in the cigar lounge."

"Please don't tell me you smoke cigars. My father and uncles do, and my grandfather did too. It'll remind me of them if I smell it on you."

That was the last thing I wanted—reminding my delicious young wife of the old creepy men in her family, and I was fairly sure she knew. It was a good thing I didn't like cigars anyway. "If you don't like the scent, I won't smoke them."

She narrowed her eyes then smiled. "Why do I get the feeling you never liked them to begin with?"

She pushed up and crawled back up to me, nestling against my chest, her cheek on my shoulder. “Will you teach me?”

“It won’t be the first thing I’m teaching you, so why not?” I said in a low, possessive voice.

She rolled her eyes. I wished I could say it annoyed me. “We could play a round now?”

“It’s late. I have an early day.”

“Come on. It’s not even eleven. Entertain your young wife.”

“All right,” I said to my own surprise. Giulia was playing the right cards, and she knew it, and yet I didn’t feel played by her. She wasn’t doing it to better me or for even less noble reasons, she was just… her quirky self. I knifed up, taking Giulia with me. She pressed a thankful kiss to my mouth and slipped out of bed, so full of energy it was admirable. It was hard to resist her enthusiasm. I swung out of bed and straightened, stifling a smirk at her appraisal. Giulia never tried to hide that she liked my body. I picked up my pajama bottoms from the floor and dragged them over my hips.

Giulia slipped into her nightgown and grabbed the baby monitor then rushed toward the door, holding out her hand. Shaking my head with a chuckle, I took her hand and let her drag me down. I couldn’t remember if I’d ever been this spontaneous. Maybe as a teenager, but that time seemed like a lifetime ago.

Giulia’s eyes widened when we entered the cigar lounge, which rarely functioned as that—only when my father or business acquaintances insisted on cigars. The faded smell of smoke lingered, but it wasn’t very prominent because Sybil always worked her magic with air freshener.

In the beginning, I’d occasionally played pool by myself or with Faro, but even that seemed like forever ago. Work had filled every waking second of my days recently as I tried to stop people from talking about Gaia by creating new incidents to talk about. But my brutality in the job hardly drew the necessary attention to take away from the gossip surrounding my wife’s death—it was old news after all.

Giulia took everything in. Apart from the four armchairs in front of the fireplace, there was a professional pool table. Giulia rushed over to the cues and took one. “Show me?”

Fuck yes. I’d suffered sleepless nights with less entertaining things than teaching Giulia how to play pool.

Giulia was bent over the table, trying to hit the eight ball. Her tongue was wedged between her lips in concentration. My chest was pressed up to her back. I'd sent most of the balls into their respective pockets and again, my hand guided Giulia's as we sent the eight ball flying into its hole. Giulia grinned, twisted her face, and pressed an enthusiastic kiss to my lips.

Simona's cry blared from the speakers, reminding me that our life couldn't only be filled with nights of pool and sex. I straightened, the weight of my responsibilities returning to my shoulders and with it the worry that this wouldn't last. Giulia snatched up the baby monitor, and we headed up to Simona's room.

As usual, Simona's cries escalated with every passing moment, and the longer she cried the harder it would be to calm her down. Giulia turned on the lights and walked into the bedroom, but I waited in the doorway, wanting to see how she fared.

Giulia leaned over the crib and lifted my daughter up, cradling her to her chest. I was always the one who took her out of bed when she cried.

Simona fell silent and was staring up at my young wife. I waited for the inevitable outburst, an even worse crying fit than before, but Simona only let out a small cry. "Shh. You're the cutest little thing I've ever seen." And then Giulia bent down and kissed my daughter's left cheek then the right. "With the cutest chubby cheeks that I can imagine."

My heart thudded in my chest, an uneven staccato I could feel in my ears. I couldn't move. Simona reached for Giulia's bangs and tugged, but my wife only laughed and blew out air, sending her hair flying up, causing Simona's eyes to widen. Then she giggled.

Simona giggled.

Giulia looked up and smiled, unguarded, happy, hopeful. I turned around and stalked out. "I'll prepare the bottle," I pressed. Even though I wished she wouldn't, Giulia followed me downstairs. She watched me the entire time as I prepared the formula. I could feel her questions hovering in the room between us. She didn't ask, only kept cooing at my daughter.

When the bottle was ready, I went over to her. She leaned into me. "Why don't you feed her while I hold her?"

I stared into those blue eyes, feeling reminded of the way I felt when I stood on the dunes in front of my beach house, peering toward the ocean.

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FOURTEEN

Cassio kept his promise. The next day he came home at dinnertime. To be honest, I was surprised. I hadn't thought he'd keep his promise that he'd given with my naked body on top of him. Maybe I had my own trust issues to work through.

He looked surprised when he walked into the kitchen where we had dinner the last few days. Sybil stood from where she was seated, obviously unsure how to act. Elia stood as well and inclined his head before he grabbed his plate and headed through the backdoor, probably toward the guard house. He and I'd cleared things up in the morning after Cassio informed him that I knew what was going on. Elia had been awkward after that, obviously embarrassed, but I'd told him that he'd done his job and that I wasn't angry. He couldn't have told Cassio "no" after all.

"Why don't you eat in the dining room?" he asked. Simona grinned when she spotted her dad. Her fingers and cheeks were smeared with smashed peas, but Cassio didn't seem to mind. He walked up to her, pressed a kiss to her forehead, and barely escaped her dirty grabby hands before she could ruin his suit.

Daniele didn't react in any way, only clutched the fork with the speared carrot slice in his little fist. For a moment, I caught the longing in his eyes, though. He wanted to be close to his dad, but something stopped him. Cassio turned to Daniele and kissed the top of his head before he walked up to me. Daniele watched us closely. Cassio touched my shoulder and

squeezed lightly before he took a seat across from me. I couldn’t deny it. I was disappointed. I wished he’d have kissed me. Maybe he worried how Daniele would react. After all, his mom had been dead for only six months.

“I prefer to have dinner in the dining room,” he said simply.

I hated that there was a distance between us when we weren’t alone. “I didn’t know you’d be home for dinner.”

“I told you I’d be, and it’ll remain that way. If I can’t make dinner, I’ll give you a call.”

Sybil put a plate with roasted pork, mashed potatoes, and maple balsamic Brussels sprouts that were to die for down in front of him. He gave her a curt nod.

“I’ll check on the laundry,” she said and slipped out, leaving her half-eaten plate.

“We can have dinner in the dining room from now on,” I said.

Daniele grabbed a piece of his pork and tossed it under the table. Cassio’s expression shifted to anger, but I quickly shook my head then said to Daniele, “Now it’s your turn to eat a bite.”

Daniele speared a piece of pork and stuffed it in his mouth, chewing dutifully.

Cassio’s brows furrowed. “What’s going on?” His voice was moderately calm, but I could tell that he didn’t approve of the situation.

“Daniele and I have a deal. He can feed Loulou scraps if he eats a bite in turn.”

Cassio released a breath. Simona began to whine, stretching out her arms toward him. He got up, wiped her face and hands with a wet dishtowel, and put her on his lap before he continued with dinner. I stifled a smile. It was an adorable sight: Cassio dressed in his three-piece suit, looking impressive and powerful, with tiny Simona on his lap in her sunflower dress. He hadn’t even complained about the flowers. Again, Daniele’s eyes slanted to Cassio, who was staring down at Simona and didn’t notice.

I stroked his head gently. He peered up at me, his small face so sad and helpless, it turned my stomach over. If only he’d speak to me.

Feeling Cassio’s eyes on me, I picked up my fork and ate a bite of my pork. “How was your day?” He hadn’t told me anything about what he did during the day so far, but he hadn’t exactly been home early enough to talk.

“The usual.”

Maybe I should have expected an evasive answer like that. After all, Simona and Daniele were in the room. Talking about his type of business around them might scar them even more than their mother's death.

"What did you do?"

"We went to the dog park again, right?" I said to Daniele, who gave a small nod before dropping a piece of pork on the floor. "And Elia helped me set up my painting room." I couldn't wait to paint again, to lose myself in my art.

Cassio's gaze traced my face in a way that made me feel self-conscious. I straightened my bangs, wondering if he still hated them. They were part of me, had always been.

"I was thinking we could spend the weekend down at my beach house."

My eyes widened. It had been a while since I was at a beach.

Cassio tried to catch Daniele's eyes. The boy had definitely perked up hearing about the beach. "What do you think, Daniele? We can build sandcastles like last time."

Daniele gave a small shrug, which was something.

Cassio and I took the children to bed after dinner. Cassio put Simona down in her crib while I helped Daniele change. It was easier that way. Daniele didn't get as upset, and so shortly before he was supposed to sleep that was for the best. I covered him with his blanket when he lay in bed and tousled his hair. "Loulou will love the beach."

Daniele's mouth tugged into a small smile. Then his gaze darted to something behind me. He bit his lower lip. A shadow fell over us and a moment later, Cassio bent down and kissed Daniele's forehead. "Sleep tight."

I stood and with a last wave at Daniele, I extinguished the lights and closed the door. I followed Cassio down the hallway, but before we could reach the staircase, he turned to me, grabbed my neck, and kissed me deeply, stealing my breath. My body sprang to life immediately as he pressed me into the wall, his big palm on my breast, kneading, his hips grinding against me. He was hard, digging into my belly insistently.

"Bed," I whispered.

"Fuck no."

I blinked but Cassio didn't allow me to get my bearings. His mouth on mine, he grasped my upper thighs and hoisted me up. "Right here. Against this wall."

My eyes widened. Cassio bit down on my throat then lavished the spot with his tongue. “What about Sybil?”

“Gone.” His growl vibrated against my skin. Holding me up with one muscled arm, and the pressure of his strong body, he slipped his hand between our bodies. The hiss of his zipper sent a shiver down my spine a moment before he shoved my panties aside and entered me in one hard stroke. I arched, half in pain, half in pleasure. It was the first time he took me without much preparation.

His mouth pressed against my ear. “Didn’t I tell you to stop wearing those over-the-knee socks and ridiculous dresses?”

I met his gaze, grinding myself against him, chasing the pleasure even as my body fought to accommodate Cassio’s length. “Is this my punishment?” My lips teased up into a challenging smile.

Cassio’s grip on me tightened as he thrust up again, driving me against the wall. I dug my heels into his lower back. “No, honey,” he rasped, and that word warmed me like hot cocoa. “It’s a warning.”

I laughed. It wasn’t a good one. The words never left my lips because Cassio started pounding into me, harder and deeper than before, forcing my body to yield to him, and it did. Soon I was so slick around him, the wet sound of our bodies joining filled the hallway. Cassio’s harsh kiss swallowed my cries of release when I came in a violent shudder. He lowered me to the floor and my legs almost gave out. “Down,” he ordered.

My eyes flashed up in indignation at the demand, but his dominant expression and the primal hunger in his eyes spoke to a part of me that definitely didn’t mind his commanding attitude. I dropped to my knees.

His fingers tangled in my hair as he took my mouth.

I kept my eyes on his face, loving to watch him let loose.

Afterward, he pulled me up to my feet, tilting my head up. “Okay or too hard?”

I stood on my tiptoes and pressed my face into the crook of his neck, touched by the consideration in his voice. I was slightly sore and would probably continue to feel that way until tomorrow, but it felt good in a naughty way, as if Cassio had left his mark inside of me.

“Giulia?” The low rumble of his voice penetrated my thoughts. “Too hard?”

I shook my head with a small sigh. He cupped the back of my head then pressed a kiss to my crown. The gesture was so loving, it kindled emotions

in me I was scared to allow. After all, this was a marriage of convenience before all else. I didn't want to love him before he loved me.

What a silly thing to think. As if you could postpone your love until it was convenient. I pulled back and allowed him to lead me into the bedroom.

Later in bed, I snuggled against Cassio, my cheek on his chest, his fingers tracing my upper arm. We had already extinguished the lights and were trying to fall asleep. From the lingering alertness in Cassio's body, I knew he wasn't anywhere close to sleep. "You can't with me in your arms, right?"

I didn't want to sound hurt, but I did.

Cassio paused in his stroking, his ribcage expanding under my head in a sigh. "Let's see. I promised you I'd try."

"Okay. Like you'll try to trust me."

Silence followed. He was trying. I couldn't ask for more.

"Did Daniele say anything yet?"

"No," I said. "He communicates with nods. His birthday is in two weeks, right?"

"Yeah. Three years. I still remember when I first held him."

"I saw a photo of a newborn. They don't look very cute with all the grime on them."

"He was already cleaned when I held him the first time a few hours after he was born."

"Don't the nurses hand the baby over to their parents right after birth?"

"I wasn't there when Daniele was born."

"Oh, work?" I guessed.

Tension radiated from Cassio, and I knew it hadn't been that. "Gaia preferred to give birth alone."

I was glad the darkness hid my expression. Why would a woman not want her husband with her when she gave birth to their child? "Oh."

Silence filled the dark. "What about Simona?"

Cassio shook his head.

"Isn't it unfair toward you not to let you experience the miracle of birth?" Wasn't that what everyone called it, even though I couldn't see the magic in squeezing something that big out of my vagina.

"I have a busy morning on Friday, but I want us to head out to my beach house in the afternoon, so we'll have all of Saturday to enjoy our time

there.”

“Why won’t you talk to me about the past?” I said softly.

Cassio shifted, his mouth hot against my ear. “Stop prying, Giulia. You won’t like what you’ll find. Now sleep.”

His words stung. I began to roll over to give him space so he could sleep, which obviously wasn’t going to happen with me close, but his arm around my waist tightened. He lodged me against his body once more. I swallowed.

“You’re young,” he said. “I worry about all the ways I’ll hurt you before you’ve grown into a jaded adult to survive in our world and at my side.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“I know, but eventually you will.”

I hadn’t been to my beach house in three months. The last time I went, I’d longed for peace and quiet after Gaia’s funeral. I’d come alone without Simona and Daniele because every look at them reminded me of the woman I wanted to forget.

Giulia’s eyes widened in awe when we pulled up in front of the splendid white bungalow on the beach. Mia owned the house beside it, but we rarely visited this place at the same time, even if she’d been insisting on a family vacation for a while. Simona had fallen asleep in her seat, but Daniele’s face flashed with recognition. He’d loved this place in the past. I worried even that had changed.

The wind nipped at our clothes. November wasn’t the best time to spend time outside around here, but I wanted to show Giulia this house. I wasn’t even sure why. It would have been more impressive in spring or summer.

Another gust tore Giulia's black cowboy hat from her head. My hand lashed out, snatching the thing out of the air.

Giulia let out an astonished laugh. "That's an impressive show of reflexes."

I held the hat out to her, and she took it with a sweet smile. "Quick reflexes are required to survive if you have as many enemies as I do. But I don't know why I caught this thing. It's ugly." Giulia had once more chosen an outfit I decidedly hadn't chosen for her. Cowboy boots, black shorts with suspenders, a bright pink sweater, and an oversized coat that would have fit me as well. It was a fashion nightmare.

Worry tightened her face, her hand frozen on the door. "How many attempts at your life have you survived?"

I tried to remember. It was difficult to say. There had been so many. Only a couple had gotten close.

Giulia shook her head. "Never mind, if you have to think about it this long, I probably don't want to know. Just promise to be careful, okay?"

I walked around the car and opened the back door then lifted Simona out. Giulia and I had already fallen in a sort of routine where my children were concerned. She handled Daniele and I handled Simona. It made our life easier, even if it turned my heart to ice that my son refused to be close to me.

"Can you take Loulou's transport crate?"

I took it from the trunk. Giulia had insisted we take the dog with us, even if I'd have preferred to let Sybil watch it. Refusing Giulia was more difficult than it should have been.

Pressing Simona protectively to my chest to shield her from the cold, I led Giulia toward the front door. She had trouble carrying Daniele on her hip. Even though he was a thin boy, he was tall for his age and Giulia was petite. It would have made more sense for me to carry him.

She set him down the moment we were inside and looked around in wonder. The interior, like the outside of the house, was white. The back of the house facing the beach was almost entirely made of glass windows, giving views of the dunes and ocean. The marram grass bowed down under the force of nature, and dark clouds hung low over the water. Even on tumultuous days like this, the white of the furniture illuminated the house without electricity.

Giulia rushed toward the windows, peering out. Her eyes drifted to the left where a swing swayed gently in the wind. The porch protected it from rain. She reached for the handle.

I set down the dog crate then carried Simona over to her white cradle. She was still sound asleep. “It’s too stormy. We can go outside tomorrow.”

Giulia pouted, looking like the teenager I tried to pretend she wasn’t. Sometimes I managed to forget, especially when she handled the kids and in bed, but I wasn’t always successful.

Daniele stood beside her. She held out her hand, and he took it. I froze, my heart squeezing a little tighter. With a smile, she led him toward the crate and released the dog. It creeped out slowly, looking around.

“If it pees on the white carpets, it’ll sleep outside.”

Giulia rolled her eyes as if she thought I was joking.

The dog began to sniff everything. At least, it didn’t attack my pant legs anymore.

Daniele followed the dog like he was a lost puppy.

“I’ll get our luggage,” I said before I went back out into the cold. When I returned with our two bags, Giulia stood in the open fridge. I carried them into our bedroom down the hall before I joined Giulia in the kitchen. “I told my housekeeper to stock the fridge.”

“You have a housekeeper for your beach house?”

“Mia and my parents have houses on the same beach. The housekeeper takes care of all three.”

“What about Ilaria.”

“Too far.”

Giulia nodded. “So… can you cook?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Of course not.”

“Of course not,” Giulia said quietly, looking into the fridge as if it was her demise. “I guess I’ll just have to try my luck, then.”

I watched her assemble an array of vegetables, rice, and chicken on the counter. “Do you like Asian?”

I leaned against the counter, crossing my arms over my chest. “Depends.”

“Do you like it spicy?”

My mouth twitched. Giulia gave me an indignant look before her gaze darted to Daniele, who squatted in front of the window, the dog beside him.

I moved toward her, touching her hips. “I can handle the burn, don’t worry.”

Giulia swallowed.

I headed toward the window as she began to prepare whatever dinner she had in mind. Daniele briefly looked up when I stopped beside him and the dog before he focused on the ocean once more.

“Tomorrow we can spend the afternoon on the beach.”

He didn’t reply, but I hadn’t expected him to, so I just stared out like he did.

After dinner, we brought Daniele and Simona, who’d woken halfway through it, to bed. They shared the room beside ours, even if there were two more bedrooms in the house.

“Can we sit on the swing?” Giulia asked when I wrapped my arms around her.

“It’s cold.”

“You can keep me warm. Please?”

“All right.”

She grinned and grabbed our coats from the rack while I gathered a couple of thick wool blankets. The wind had settled, but it was freezing when we stepped onto the porch. Despite her coat, Giulia shivered when we huddled on the swing. I swaddled her in the blankets before I wrapped an arm around her. She curled up like a cat beside me.

In the past I’d spend many late nights on the porch alone, seeking solitude. Gaia never joined me. Having Giulia beside me didn’t feel like an intrusion, though. “You’re not what I expected.”

“Not how?”

Our breath fogged up the night air, and the roar of the waves drifted up to us. “I thought I’d have to coerce you into sex, that you’d shy away from the physical side of our marriage.”

She lifted her head. “I really like sleeping with you.” The moonlight lit up her eyes. “You make me feel really good.”

I chuckled. “That’s how it’s supposed to be.”

“Do I make you feel good too?” Her tone was playful, but I caught a hint of uncertainty.

“Yeah, you do.” I pulled her closer for a languid kiss. Not just because of the sex either. As if to remind me, I slid my hand under the blankets and

her clothes, brushing my knuckles along her side. Her resulting twitch and giggle lit up my insides.

"Did you ever—"

"No talk about the past."

She fell silent, and we stared off toward the ocean.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt almost at peace, but in this moment, it was close.

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FIFTEEN

Cassio

Despite the cold weather, we took a stroll along the beach the next day. Simona was strapped to Giulia's front in the sling while Daniele and Loulou jogged along the edge of the water. The dog barked at the waves, trying to snap at the frothing water.

What a stupid thing, but it made Daniele and Giulia smile, so it could stay for now. Seagulls soared over our heads. Giulia held out her hand, and I linked our fingers after a moment of hesitation, worried about Daniele's reaction, but he didn't seem to care. His attention was on the dog and the ocean.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I took it out to find a message from Faro.

Call me ASAP

Frowning, I pushed the phone back into my pocket. The wind roared too loudly for a phone conversation.

"What is it?" Giulia asked.

"We need to head back to the house. I need to call Faro."

Her face fell, and for half a second I considered ignoring Faro's message, but I'd told him not to bother me unless it was important. "Oh, sure."

I squeezed her hand. "We can head out tomorrow morning again."

She nodded then called, "Loulou, Daniele, come here!"

Both the dog and my boy turned to her and skipped toward us. For a moment Daniele's face reminded me of the past, almost as childishly innocent as back then.

The moment we were back in the beach house, I called Faro while Giulia cleaned sand off the dog and Daniele.

Simona crawled on the floor, chasing a ball that rattled in the most annoying way. "What is it? I hope it's important. I didn't want to be disturbed."

"While you were busy banging your young wife, Luca went berserk. He killed his Uncles Gottardo and Ermano, and that cousin of his whose brother's throat he crushed."

I leaned back, shocked. "What the fuck happened?"

"Nobody really knows. Matteo's not very forthcoming with information. It's rumored Luca chopped up the entire new chapter of the Tartarus MC in Jersey too."

Simona tugged at my pants and slowly pulled herself up. I reached out to steady her as she grinned toothlessly up at me.

"There are rumors that he's on the hunt for traitors… some suspect it's got something to do with his wife. This is hush-hush, but she went to Chicago where she met Dante fucking Cavallaro."

I braced myself on my thighs, my thoughts spinning out of control. "Do you think Aria was in on the betrayal?"

"She's still alive."

Luca and Aria had appeared happy on the outside, or as happy as a marriage in our world could be, especially if the husband was a man like Luca… or myself.

Giulia appeared in the living room, worry clouding her face as she looked at me. Slowly, she walked closer.

"I'll be back tonight. Arrange a meeting. My father needs to be there as well." If Luca went on a major killing spree like that, I needed to make sure my own city was cleaner than clean.

"Will do."

I hung up.

Giulia sank down beside me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing for you to worry about."

"Your face says something else."

“It’s business. Luca killed two Underbosses. His Uncles Gottardo and Ermano.”

She jerked, eyes filling with shock. I realized how inconsiderate I’d been. They were her uncles too, but I’d never gotten the impression that she liked either of them very much, which wasn’t surprising. They had been sadistic egomaniacs.

“Are you sad about your uncles?”

She looked as if I’d pulled her out of her daze then gave a sharp shake of her head. “I’m worried about you. What if Luca gets rid of more Underbosses?”

“He won’t get rid of me. Not unless I give him reason to, and I haven’t.”

She nodded slowly, then her eyes widened again. “Kiara!”

“Who?”

“My cousin Kiara. She’s Ermano’s daughter. What about her and my aunt?”

“I don’t know. Faro didn’t mention anything.”

She gripped my arm. “Cassio, please find out. Kiara is only twelve. What if she got hurt?”

“I doubt Luca would hurt a child.”

Her worried expression compelled me to pick up my phone again. Usually I would have called Luca directly, but that seemed unwise in the current situation. “Pack our bags and get Simona and Daniele ready. We need to leave in thirty minutes. I’ll ask my father about Kiara.”

Father picked up at once. “Faro told you?”

“He did. That can wait until our meeting. I need info on Ermano’s daughter and wife.”

“The kid is alive, but Ermano shot his wife.”

Father’s voice held a note that set my teeth on edge. “All right. I’ve been talking to friends in New York, trying to get a feel for Luca’s current mood, if he’s done killing—”

“Everything’s going to be fine.”

“You should have told him everything, Cassio.”

“Father, it’s going to be fine. The past is the past. Telling Luca now would definitely be my death sentence.”

I hung up and went into the bedroom where Giulia was packing our bags. Her eyes were fearful when she met my gaze.

“Kiara is alive but her mother’s dead.”

Giulia covered her mouth with her palm. “What’s going to happen to her?”

“Luca still got a few relatives he could ask to take the girl in.” I took the bags from her. “Come now. I really need to get back.”

She nodded slowly, still looking a bit stunned. I walked over to her, cupping her cheek. “Everything will be fine.”

The drive back passed in relative silence. Giulia was lost in thought, and Simona fell asleep as she usually did in the car.

Elia and Domenico were already in my house when we arrived. They helped carry everything inside. Giulia followed me as I changed into my usual business attire.

“Where’s the meeting taking place?”

I knotted my tie. “You don’t know the place. It’s a nightclub.”

I could tell that Giulia wanted to ask more questions, but I didn’t want to talk business with her. I kissed her lips lightly. “Don’t wait up tonight. It’ll be very late.”

On my way out of the house, I called Faro again. “Everything set up?”

“Yes, everyone’s on their way.”

“Have our watchers said anything about movement in the clubhouse?”

“They seem to have a meeting. All the bikes are in front of the club.”

Now that Luca had destroyed an entire chapter in cold blood, the retribution of the MC was only a matter of time. They were volatile, bound by fewer rules than us. It was part of my life I didn’t want Simona, Daniele, or Giulia to be part of. I’d do my best to protect them from it.

After Cassio was gone, I grabbed my phone and sank down on the sofa. Simona was busy with a picture book that simulated animal noises, and Daniele sat on the blanket beside her, only half focused on his game while he kept throwing glances toward his sister's book.

Loulou curled up beside me, and I began stroking her soft fur at once, hoping it would calm me. Since Cassio had told me about my uncles, my heart had been beating faster than usual. In the mob, falling from grace usually meant your death. I wasn't sad about the death of my uncles. They had been bad men, even by our very twisted standards, but I was worried what it meant for Cassio, for us, and I couldn't stop thinking about my poor cousin, Kiara, who was now an orphan.

I called Dad's number. He didn't pick up after the first few rings, which was unusual for him. He always made time for me. What if Luca had decided to get rid of him too? It wasn't a secret that Dad wasn't his favorite. Marrying me off to Cassio was supposed to guarantee Dad's position, but would Cassio really protect him? They didn't like each other very much. Maybe for me, Cassio would put a good word in about my father.

Finally, Dad took the call, and I slumped in relief.

"Giulia, tonight's not the best time for a call."

"Are you all right? I heard what happened."

Dad sighed. "I'm fine. I can't deny it, it's been disturbing to hear about Luca taking down one family member after the other, but I've never done anything that could be construed as betrayal."

"What's going to happen with Kiara? Have you heard anything?"

"Matteo contacted us and asked if we'd be willing to take her in."

Dad's voice made it clear that he wasn't fond of the idea. "She needs a home and we're family."

“Your mother and I have worked hard to improve our family’s standing, taking in a traitor’s daughter could ruin all our efforts.”

“Dad,” I said, shocked. “She’s twelve. She’s innocent. Please don’t tell me you’ll refuse to take her in because of something her father did. That would be exceedingly cruel.”

Dad was silent for a moment. It wasn’t that I didn’t think him capable of cruelty, but he preferred not to appear that way in my eyes. “Luca might not give us much of a choice anyway. With the way things are going, disappointing him could be too risky.”

“Then don’t risk it and give Kiara a home.”

“How are things between Cassio and you?”

“Good.”

“They are?” Dad asked as if he didn’t trust his ears. It saddened me, knowing that he’d expected the worst from Cassio and had still given me to him.

“They are. Promise to call me as soon as you know more about Kiara, okay?”

“I will. Your mother wants a word with you.”

I stifled a sigh. Knowing Mom, she was probably alarmed the recent development with Kiara might kill her social standing, and that meant she was already planning how to take countermeasures—ones that usually involved me or Christian.

“Giulia, how are you?” The forced cheer in her voice confirmed my suspicions.

“Okay. A bit worried about Kiara.”

“When can your father and I expect a grandchild from you?”

All right. That was her plan. “Simona and Daniele are both young. Taking care of them takes up all my time and energy.”

“They aren’t yours, Giulia. You have to make clever decisions. Having a child of your own will solidify your position, especially if you have a boy who might become Underboss.”

“Daniele will be Underboss, Mom. And if I ever want a child, it won’t be for tactical purposes.” Cassio and I hadn’t discussed children yet. He’d insisted I take the pill, which I would have done anyway because I definitely didn’t want to get pregnant at the moment. I wanted to be the best mother for Daniele and Simona, and a third child wouldn’t make the task any easier.

“Now that you’re a wife, you can’t afford being naïve.”

I sighed. “I need to hang up now. Simona needs me.” I didn’t wait for her reply. Lowering the phone, I watched Daniele push the animal images in the picture book alongside Simona. The cacophony of meows, mooohs, and woof-woofs caused them to laugh. I leaned back with a smile. Every day, they captured more of my heart.

I tried to wait up for Cassio, but eventually I drifted off, awkwardly curled up in the armchair in front of the fireplace.

I wasn’t sure what time it was when cold hands touched my arm, jerking me out of my slumber. It was dark in the room except for the dying embers in the hearth dancing before my tired eyes. Cassio hovered over me, smelling of gunpowder, smoke, and whisky. “I told you not to wait for me.”

“What time is it?” I slurred, my tongue and muscles heavy.

“Late.”

I tried to make out Cassio’s face to connect the tense note in his voice to his expression, but the darkness concealed his features. Reaching out, I touched his arm. The crisp fabric of his shirt stuck to his skin. It was stiff against my fingertips, crusted with something. Cassio pulled out of my grasp with a sharp intake.

I was momentarily wide awake. “Cassio?”

I sat up and Cassio took a step back from me, out of my reach. “Go to bed, Giulia. Now.”

I stood, moving toward him. The dying embers didn’t give off enough light to see much, but part of his white shirt was dark. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“Giulia, to bed. Now.”

“No. I’m not a child, I’m your wife, and I’m not going anywhere until I know you’re fine.”

“Your insolence is driving me to the brink.”

“I think you like my insolence.”

He sighed and walked out. I followed after him. The foyer was dark too. My worry increased with every step and Cassio’s continued silence. When

we finally arrived in our bedroom, I turned on the light switch. My heart dropped, seeing the blood on Cassio's white shirt. Most of it had dried, only a small splotch on his arm looked fresher. Cassio continued into the bathroom without a word, but his expression conveyed his disapproval as I followed. "What happened?"

Cassio unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged it off, but one of his sleeves stuck to his arm. I cringed when I saw the wound it was stuck to. I grabbed a towel and dabbed it into warm water then pushed Cassio's hand away. I soaked the bloody material of his sleeve, waiting for it to become unstuck from the long cut so there wouldn't be further damage.

Cassio watched me almost curiously, no sign that someone had obviously used his forearm as a cutting board. I carefully unfastened his shirt, and Cassio gave the slightest twitch but didn't make a sound. "Not your first rodeo, hmm?" I needed to make light of the situation before my worry for my husband drove me into a panic attack. What if something happened to him? What would I do with two small children, a huge house, and a slightly twisted dog?

"It's only a shallow cut. I'll survive."

I laughed but it sounded forced. Once the wound was freed from the confines of his shirt, Cassio dropped the ruined garment on the floor. "I can handle this." He took a first aid kit from a cupboard beneath the sink.

"Won't you tell me what happened?"

He cleaned his wound but when I didn't look away, he sighed. "I'm not sure you should know the details of my business."

"I'm part of your life, so let me be a part of it."

The hesitation remained in his eyes. He looked down to his wound and patched it up with butterfly strips. "Luca's been dealing with traitors as well as an MC that's been giving us trouble."

At the confused look on my face, he added, "Motorcycle club. They're stronger in the south, especially Texas, New Mexico, and Florida, but chapters have been popping up around here. Luca asked me to see what the local chapter was up to. We captured one, a strong fighter. He got me with his knife."

"Why would you get involved in this? Why don't you send your men to deal with this? My father would never risk his life in an attack."

Cassio smiled ironically. "That's why your father isn't the best Underboss. If you want your men's loyalty, you have to show them that

you’re willing to fight at their side.”

I shook my head. “That’s how people get killed.”

“Are you worried about me?”

I wrapped my arm around his middle and pressed my cheek to his chest. “Promise me to be more careful.”

“I’m always careful.”

“The wound tells a different story.”

“Let’s get you into bed now. It’s—”

Simona’s cry rang from the speakers. “No bed for me.”

Cassio pressed his palm to my lower back and nudged me toward the bed. “You go to sleep and I’ll handle Simona.”

“You need to rest—”

“No. Let me handle her.”

I realized he needed to do it, to hold his little daughter. Maybe it was his way to remind himself of the good in this world.

“All right.” I sank down on the bed, feeling completely drained. Cassio kissed me briefly before he headed for the nursery.

I’d grown up in the mafia world. Death and danger were constant companions, but Dad had never come home injured. He knew how to stay out of trouble and let others risk their lives for him. I admired Cassio for his bravery. Yet at the same time, I wished he were a coward like Dad so he’d be safe. For his children… and me.

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SIXTEEN

Daniele and I settled on the floor. It was bonding time, not just between him and me, but also with Loulou, while Simona had her afternoon nap. The last couple of evenings Cassio had come home late again, and I hoped it wouldn't turn into a permanent thing. For now, I focused my main attention on Daniele, Simona, and Loulou. They kept me distracted enough.

Loulou trotted closer with a ball in her muzzle as she usually did when I sat down on the floor. I took the ball from her and rolled it over the floor. Daniele followed everything with curious eyes. After two tosses, I held the ball out to him. He took it and flung it away then smiled widely when Loulou chased her toy. We did this for a couple of minutes before I put the ball away and patted the spot in front me. Loulou came closer, her pink tongue lolling about adorably. I stroked her gently then crossed my legs and motioned for Loulou to come even closer. She curled up in my lap, and I stroked her ears gently, amazed at how silky this spot of her felt to the touch.

Daniele moved closer until his knees bumped against my thigh. I could tell how much he wanted to touch Loulou. I regarded her for a while to see if she was ready for more closeness. In the last few days, she hadn't tried to avoid Daniele anymore. Now, she seemed completely relaxed, her eyes half-closed as she watched Daniele. "Do you want to touch her?"

Daniele gave a quick nod.

“Try to move slowly, so she can get used to your presence, all right?” Another sharp nod.

“She’s shy. She needs to get to know you and see that you’re her friend.”

I took Daniele’s hand and put it on Loulou’s back. Her ears twitched in curiosity and her eyes opened a bit more. Slowly, I moved Daniele’s hand along her side, staying away from her head for now because I’d read that dogs often felt threatened by a touch there. Loulou’s eyes drooped once more as she enjoyed the caresses. “See? You have to be careful. Loulou is small. Don’t tug at her ears or tail, all right?”

Daniele nodded, watching his hand on the fur, mesmerized.

I pulled away, allowing him to do this on his own. Maybe we were on the right path. Even Cassio had stopped complaining about Loulou. Simona allowed me to calm her at night often now, which gave Cassio the chance to sleep more.

I smiled, feeling a wave of optimism.

I was half asleep when Cassio returned home that night. A week had passed since the killings, and the kids and I had barely seen him.

I watched him get ready for bed. Then he stretched out beside me.

“When will you be home for dinner again?”

Cassio touched my hip, pulling me closer. His lips found mine but despite the rush of heat, I drew back. Our only interactions apart from a few exchanged words had been sex. He sighed. “Work is important. I have too much to do. I’m tired. I only want to take my mind off things when I get home and not argue with you.” He kissed me again, and this time I pushed him back, angry.

“You treat me like a nanny and whore, Cassio. I deserve better.”

“I would never treat you like a whore,” he growled. “You are my wife and I want you. If I remember correctly, you always enjoy it.”

I did. Cassio made sure I came before and during intercourse. “That doesn’t mean I don’t need us to form an emotional bond as well. I thought

we were on a good path, but now you're pulling back again. Is it really just because of your workload or is it something else?"

He was silent for a moment. "I'm trying to make sure you and my kids are safe. I need to be in absolute control of my city to guarantee your safety." He kissed me again, softer this time, but I could feel the urgency lurking just beneath. "I'll try to be home around dinnertime."

Was it to appease me? I allowed him to deepen the kiss, to slide down my nightgown and awaken my body with his lips.

The next day, I browsed party ideas for third birthdays. Daniele's special day was in a week, and I wanted to surprise him with a cake and a themed birthday party. Clutching the edge of the sofa, Simona pulled herself up to her legs beside me, grinning proudly.

"Good," I cooed while I kept an eye on Daniele and Loulou. He was throwing her ball, and she dropped it in front of him every time. It was beautiful and I wished Cassio could see.

My phone pinged with a message. Surprise rushed through me when I saw it was from Christian, telling me he was in the area and wanted to visit. I hadn't seen him since the wedding. In the past, I would only see him every two months because we lived in different cities, but now that had changed, at least until he returned to Baltimore to rule at Dad's side—whenever that was going to be. I hurried into the kitchen to tell Sybil to prepare a few sandwiches and coffee.

Fifteen minutes later, his car pulled up in front of the house. "Your uncle's coming to visit," I told Daniele, who'd been following my every step all day. I carried Simona on my arm, despite her squirminess. She wanted to crawl but she was quick and it was difficult to keep an eye on her in the vast house.

Daniele's eyes grew wide, a mix of shock and hope marking his face. His reaction surprised me. Cassio only had sisters. Had Gaia had a brother? I didn't remember. The bell rang. Loulou stormed out of the living room, barking. She jerked to a stop in front of the door, scratching it.

“I’m getting the door!” I called before Sybil could come forward from the kitchen. Elia and Domenico could see the front step with the surveillance cameras surrounding the house so they’d know it was only my brother.

“No, Loulou,” I said sternly as I carefully pushed her to the side with my foot before I opened the door. Loulou tried to squeeze past me again, but I nudged her back again.

Christian wore a thick coat against the bitter cold December air and gave me a curious look. “Of course you’d keep the dog.”

Daniele stared at my brother then turned around and rushed upstairs. Puzzled, I smiled at Christian as I kept Loulou away with my foot. She growled at Christian. We really needed to work on her treatment of guests.

“What’s with the kid?” he asked, indicating Daniele who’d disappeared from view.

I shrugged and opened the door wider so he could enter.

Christian came in and hugged me with one arm, trying not to crush Simona, who made a sound of protest at his closeness. The cold clung to his coat and seeped into me.

I quickly pulled back and closed the door. For a moment, I didn’t pay attention, and Loulou dashed past me, jumping at Christian with angry yaps. He glared down, not impressed. “Go away,” he said, shoving her away with less gentleness than I had done.

“Loulou!” She finally stopped and trotted a few steps away.

“How are you?” Christian asked as he slipped off his coat and hung it up at the coatrack. It was obvious that he’d been here before and knew where everything was. The worry in his voice was unmistakable.

I touched his arm. “I’m fine.”

His eyes narrowed. “I can tell that you’re lying.”

“I’m fine, really. Just a bit overwhelmed. Daniele won’t talk and barely eats. I’m trying to break through his walls, to find out what happened, but I don’t know how.”

I led Christian into the living room, even if I worried about Daniele. I’d check on him later if he didn’t come down soon. Loulou followed close behind, never letting Christian out of her sight. She was brave, I had to give her that.

We settled on the sofa where I’d had Sybil set up cake, sandwiches, and cookies as well as coffee. “The kid lost his mother. Of course he’s

traumatized.”

“I know, but it’s more than that. He’s avoiding Cassio.”

“Maybe you should let the past rest, Giulia.” The way he spoke it was more a warning than advice, and his worried expression only affirmed my suspicion.

I set Simona down on the floor when her squirming got too much. She crawled off at once, heading for her blanket with her toys. “What do you know that you’re not telling me?”

Christian’s mouth thinned. “I know that Cassio doesn’t want people to rummage in his past, especially where Gaia is concerned, and I think you should respect his wish.”

“To protect him or me?”

Christian took a cookie and bit it, obviously biding his time. “Both… and those kids too.” He motioned at Simona, who squeezed a stuffed unicorn that laughed shrilly every time she did, causing her to giggle too. Her eyes flashed with joy as she gazed at me.

“How can I help Daniele if I don’t know what happened?”

“The boy will come around. He’s going to be Underboss one day. His mother’s death won’t be the last trauma he suffers.” My stomach tightened at my brother’s cold assessment.

“You’re worried Cassio will hurt me if I try to find out what happened to Gaia.”

Christian picked up his coffee cup and took a sip, contemplating his next words if his expression was an indication.

“I don’t think you need to worry. Cassio has been good to me so far, and he’s good to his children.”

Christian touched my hand, looking at me the same way Cassio sometimes did—as if I was a naïve child. “Let me tell you something about men like Cassio that I know because I’m that kind of man. Like him, I’ll be Underboss. Like him, I’ve survived and done horrible things to make me strong enough for that task. To get in a position of power in the mafia, you need a dark side. The stronger that dark side is, the more likely you’ll get into a position of power and stay there. Nobody threatens Cassio’s power.”

“I know you all have a dark side. You, Dad, Cassio, but none of you have ever hurt me nor do I think you will.”

Christian laughed bitterly. “Sometimes the dark comes out when it shouldn’t.”

Elia appeared in the doorway. “Everything all right?”

My brows snapped together. “Sure.” I glanced at the clock. It was almost five. “Why don’t you leave early? You’ve been working long hours these last few weeks. Christian will stay and protect me.”

Elia peered at my brother. I couldn’t read the look in his expression, but it definitely held a hint of suspicion. “Cassio ordered me to keep an eye on you.”

The way he said it sounded less like protection and more like surveillance. Did I need to have another talk about trust with Cassio?

Christian narrowed his eyes. “I can protect *my sister*, don’t worry.”

“Leave,” I ordered.

Elia nodded, but it was obvious that he didn’t like the idea. Still, he turned and left. After a moment, the front door opened then closed. Would he report back to Cassio again?

Christian shook his head. “Cassio keeps you on a short leash.”

I couldn’t talk about my marriage with him. It would only prove Cassio right that he had trouble trusting me.

“How’s Mom in her new role as rising star in our circles?”

Christian scoffed, but he took me up on my offer for a topic change. “She sees it endangered now that they had to take in Kiara.”

“Our cousin did nothing wrong. Her father is the traitor, not her.”

“You know how it is. She’ll suffer for his sins anyway. The children always do for the sins of their fathers.”

Was he referring to Dad’s mediocre reputation, which led many people to believe that Christian, too, wouldn’t be a good Underboss one day? Or was he referring to Cassio and Daniele?

“I’m going to call today and talk to Kiara. I wanted to give her a few days to recover from what happened.”

“I doubt you can recover from seeing your mother being killed by your own father.”

“Are we still talking about our uncle, or are you trying to hint at something else? If you’re trying to subtly tell me something, it’s not working.”

Christian took another cookie. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Of course you do. I thought you didn’t know what happened to Gaia? Was that a lie?”

“No. I just think it’s strange that Daniele avoids Cassio and doesn’t talk. That kind of trauma usually requires a strong catalyst.”

“Losing your mother in any way at that age is a strong catalyst.”

Christian gave a tense smile. “At least, Dad’s still happy about your bond with Cassio.” After that, we only talked about Dad, who was already reaping the fruits of my marriage to Cassio. Fewer people talked about him behind his back, too scared of my husband. I doubted Cassio would come to Dad’s help, though, unless I asked him to perhaps.

Simona scrunched up her face.

I sighed. “That expression means I need to change her diaper. Do you want to stay down here?”

Christian shook his head. “I can handle it. I’ve seen worse.”

I picked up Simona and we headed upstairs into her nursery. On the way, I noticed that the door to Gaia’s old room was ajar. I put Simona down on the changing table. I’d check on Daniele afterward.

Christian’s face twisted in disgust when I opened the diaper. He’d definitely never changed his child’s diaper.

“I thought you could handle it?” I teased, even if my own nose twitched at the stench, especially when Simona had any kind of meat before—like today.

“That doesn’t mean I enjoy it.”

“I don’t enjoy it either, but someone has to do it,” I said, then tickled Simona’s belly, causing her to grin. “Right?”

“Dad should have never forced you into this position. You are too young to take care of two little kids, who aren’t even your own.”

It was starting to annoy me that everyone kept saying that. Mom, now Christian, and even Cassio kept calling them *his* kids. We hadn’t been married long, but I wished he’d see how much I already cared about them. “I can handle it, Christian,” I snapped. “It’s not easy, but I’m stubborn.”

“True.”

I threw him an indignant look but couldn’t really stay mad at him seeing the grin that had accompanied my childhood. Once I was done with Simona, I put her into her crib. I could tell that she was tired. She had refused to go down for her nap at noon. She cried when I stepped back, so I bent over her and rocked the crib until her eyes drooped once more. But the moment I tried to go away, she started wailing again. This time I didn’t go to her, hoping she’d settle down. Some people said you needed to let the

kids soothe themselves and let them cry, but I found that impossibly hard to do.

“She’s really demanding,” Christian commented, leaning in the doorway with crossed arms.

I picked Simona up, trying to figure out what was wrong. She kept wailing then without warning she spit up on me and herself.

“Eww,” Christian said.

With a sigh, I changed her clothes before I put her into the crib again. This time she quieted after a couple of minutes. I motioned for Christian to be silent as we walked out and closed the door. He eyed the vomit on my shirt and in my hair. “Aren’t you going to change?”

I snorted. “No. I like smelling like a bar on Sunday morning.”

“As if you know how a bar smells.”

I didn’t. I’d never been allowed in one, and not necessarily because of my age. Cassio probably wouldn’t let me set foot in one once I turned twenty-one either. I walked into the bedroom, trying not to pay too close attention to my ruined shirt. The stench was bad enough. Christian looked around curiously. Would Cassio be angry that I brought someone else into his private quarters? He and Christian had worked together for years, but they certainly weren’t friends.

“I need to grab a quick shower. Can you check on Simona if she starts wailing again? I’m worried she’ll throw up again.”

“Sure. I’ll go wait in the hallway while you get ready. Can’t leave you out of sight without a bodyguard after all.”

I rolled my eyes then headed into the bathroom. It wasn’t easy getting out of my clothes without getting the vomit on my skin. Throwing over a bathrobe, I hurried downstairs to the laundry to put the dirty clothes in a washing machine despite Christian’s questioning look. I heaved a sigh of relief when hot water finally streamed down my body, dispersing the lingering smell of vomit.

I was blow-drying my hair when I heard commotion. Turning it off, I listened. A distorted male voice carried over to me. I took a step closer to the bedroom door.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Cassio snarled.

I put the blow-dryer down and rushed out of the bathroom, only wrapped in my towel, my hair still damp. What I saw in the bedroom sent a

wave of shock through me. Cassio shoved Christian against the wall, his forearm wedged into my brother's throat.

Cassio's gaze cut to me. Slowly his eyes slid over my half-dressed state, and his expression morphed into pure rage.

He hurled Christian to the floor, pulled his knife from his holster, and knelt on my brother's chest. My blood ran cold. Cassio pressed the gleaming blade against Christian's throat. Blood welled up at once. What was happening here?

I rushed forward and gripped his arm, trying to pull him away. "Cassio, what are you doing? Stop it! Stop it, please!"

Cassio bent down, bringing his face closer to Christian, ignoring my futile attempts at stopping him. "What the fuck are you doing alone with my wife?"

It took a couple of heartbeats for his words to trickle through the fog of my terror. "Cassio, have you lost your mind? That's my brother! Let him go now!"

Christian tried to free himself, but with Cassio's weight on his chest and the knife against his carotid, he was trapped. He couldn't speak either. His face was turning increasingly red and his eyes were frantic.

"Please, I beg you, let him go. Whatever you think is going on, it's not!"

Cassio didn't react.

Shuffling sounded in the corridor. I glanced toward the door but didn't see anything. Cassio froze following my gaze. It had to be Daniele. Cassio released Christian abruptly and shot to his feet, hiding the knife behind his back a moment before Daniele appeared in the doorway. His hair was tousled and his face sleepy. He looked from Christian on the floor to me who knelt beside him up to Cassio. Christian was pressing his palm to his bleeding throat so Daniele couldn't see anything.

Cassio kept the hand with his knife behind his back as he approached Daniele. The previous terrifying fury was hidden behind a pleasant mask. He crouched before his son. Daniele regarded me, obviously unsure what was going on. That made two of us. My heart raced in my chest and terror still clogged my throat, but I managed a smile.

"Why don't you go to your room and play another game. I'll take you to bed soon," Cassio murmured in a forced calm voice. Daniele clutched his tablet then slowly trudged away. I heard the door of his room a few seconds later and Cassio turned back to us, closing the door. Christian stumbled to

his feet, his body tense. I positioned myself between my brother and my husband, determined to stop Cassio from another attack.

Cassio's eyes sent a stab of cold fear through me. He only looked at Christian. From the corner of my eye, I saw my brother pull his own knife.

"I'll ask one last time. What. Are. You. Doing. Here?"

"Is that why Andrea disappeared?" Christian pressed out.

Cassio staggered forward. I tried to shove him away, but he was too strong. The men began grappling. "Cassio, please!"

A fierce pain burned my arm and I cried out. Cassio jerked back, his eyes wide as he peered down at me. Blood trickled from a long shallow cut in my forearm. "Did you—" he snarled at Christian.

"It was you, Cassio. You hurt me in your blind rage," I lied. I wasn't sure who had cut me, and it wasn't that bad even if it burned fiercely. I clutched the wound with my palm, shaking.

Cassio took a step back. He looked at his blade, which was smeared with blood. It might as well have been Christian's. My brother sheathed his knife but didn't take his eyes off my husband when he asked me, "Should I take you to the doctor?"

Cassio's jaw tensed.

"No," I said firmly. "Leave *now*."

"Giulia—"

"Leave!"

Cassio breathed harshly, his nostrils flaring as he watched the blood squeezing out between my fingers.

Christian slowly backed away, not turning his back to Cassio. "I'll call you in thirty minutes."

I gave a small nod, stunned by what had happened and completely at a loss why Cassio had reacted that way.

Before my brother could slip out, Cassio said in a low voice, "There's nowhere you can hide if I find out you betrayed me, Christian. Even Baltimore won't be your safe haven if I want you dead."

"If you hurt Giulia, I'll find and kill you, Cassio."

Cassio slanted my brother a dark look. Christian disappeared.

Suddenly I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to send him away. Cassio had lost his mind minutes ago for no apparent reason. His wife had died… or been killed, and nobody knew anything about it.

Our eyes met and the terrifying fury lessened. What remained was blatant distrust and a hint of guilt. He sheathed his knife then moved closer. I tensed, unsure what to expect after what I'd witnessed.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he rumbled, voice laced with regret.

He gently pushed my hand away from my cut and inspected it. I winced when he prodded the sore area. His brows pulled tight with worry. "Did I do this?"

"Does it matter? You were the one who started the fight. You lost control. You told me I'd never have reason to flinch from you. Today you proved your own words wrong."

"I didn't want to hurt you."

"Only Christian."

Cassio gritted his teeth. "Come. I need to take care of the wound."

I followed him into the bathroom. Cassio didn't say anything as he lifted me on the vanity and began cleaning my wound.

"What happened in there?" I whispered.

Cassio put a bandage on my arm then pressed a kiss to my palm. When he straightened, he no longer looked the caring husband but the bad cop starting his interrogation. "What was Christian doing up here alone with you?"

I frowned. "He came to visit. I haven't seen him in weeks. I sent Elia home because Christian is capable of protecting me."

Cassio cupped my neck. "Why did you shower before I came home?"

Was he serious? "I wasn't aware that I had to ask you for permission to shower."

He looked furious. "Why did you shower? Answer me."

"No. This is ridiculous."

"If you don't tell me why, I'll have to assume you had to wash away proof of what you did before."

I flinched, then grimaced when I realized what he was insinuating. I shoved against his chest. He didn't budge.

"Are you really saying what I think you're saying?" I was so horrified by the mere idea, I wasn't sure how to handle the situation.

Cassio grasped my thighs. "Then answer my question."

I stared at him. He was really serious. "Simona puked all over me, that's why I showered. If you don't believe me, check the washing machine. I didn't have time to turn it on yet." He released me and actually disappeared

from view. I couldn’t believe him. I hopped off the counter, and my legs almost gave out. The shock rested heavily on me. Seeing Cassio lose control like that, over something this ridiculous, it had shaken me completely. I walked into the bedroom, not sure if I wanted to spend the night here. When Cassio returned, he’d calmed visibly.

I shook my head slowly. “I can’t believe you thought I cheated on you with my brother. That’s what you thought, right?”

His expression was hard. He uncuffed his shirt, something he did often to avoid an answer.

“You should trust me, Cassio, but instead of doing that, you’re so blinded by jealousy that you even suspect my brother to have an affair with me. How sick is that? You are surrounded by beautiful willing women in your clubs all the time, and I never accuse you of sleeping with them, much less of sleeping with your sisters for God’s sake!”

“Why would I cheat with any of those women? All I can think about is you.”

I froze. “You think of me?” I’d never considered the possibility that he’d waste a single thought on me once he was at work.

Cassio watched me, a battle raging in his eyes.

“Why do you keep pushing me away, then? Why do you hurt me by not trusting me?”

Cassio reached for his tie, loosening it with a hard tug. Tension lingered in his body, and if Christian had still been here, he probably would have attacked him again. Cassio had seemed in control, so it came as a shock that he harbored so much unrestrained aggression. Of course, it only solidified that I’d been trying to ignore that side of him. His reputation was there for a reason.

“I don’t push you away. We share a bed and spend time together.”

“We have sex together, talk about what the kids did, but whenever I try to glimpse behind your mask, you block me, and now you almost kill my brother in a jealous rage. Tell me what happened.”

His jaw locked into place. I turned my back on him, needing a moment without his intense gaze. Dropping the towel, I grabbed a nightgown from a drawer. Cassio’s steps echoed behind me. “No. Don’t touch me. Not now. I need answers. If you refuse to tell me the truth, then I can’t have sex with you.” I slanted him a look over my shoulder.

Cassio began to unbutton his shirt—so calmly and precisely that for a moment I, too, wanted to roar and rage. I was glad when he moved to the door.

“I’ll take Daniele to bed.”

I sank down on the bed. I’d promised Cassio I wouldn’t move into another room, but right now I wasn’t sure if I wanted to keep that promise. I wasn’t sure if I could stay, not as long as he left me in the dark over what happened. I didn’t want to be scared of my husband, but right now I was.

Daniele’s cries rang out, and I stood then hurried into his room. Cassio tried to change him into his pajama bottoms, but Daniele fought him. Eventually, Cassio released him, and Daniele hurried toward me, hugging my legs.

Cassio appeared like a wounded animal as he straightened. “Can you —?” His voice was rough, his jaw tight.

I nodded and lifted Daniele into my arms. Cassio watched with sorrowful eyes as I dressed Daniele in his PJs then put him in bed. Cassio pressed a brief kiss on Daniele’s forehead before he and I headed out and turned off the lights.

Silence tightened around Cassio and me as we stood in the hallway.

“Tell me the truth. If you want this marriage to work, if I mean anything at all to you, tell me what happened,” I begged.

Cassio looked at my bandaged arm. His shirt was half unbuttoned, and he looked exhausted. “I need a drink. Will you join me?” He held out his hand.

I hesitated, but seeing the tortured look on his face, I took his hand and followed him downstairs.

Sybil lingered in the lobby, her expression worried. “I prepared minestrone. It’s in the kitchen. I wasn’t sure if you were going to have dinner…” She trailed off. She probably heard the fighting and saw Christian flee the house.

“We’re not hungry. Go home,” Cassio clipped.

Sybil sought my eyes. I smiled. “Thank you for making us dinner. Have a lovely evening with your husband.”

She hesitated then grabbed her purse and coat before slipping out. Cassio squeezed my hand and pulled me into the living area. A fire burned in the hearth as it did every evening. Usually the sight warmed me from the inside, now it did nothing to dissipate the cold feeling of dread. He released

me to head for the liquor cabinet. I sank down in one of the armchairs, stretching out my bare legs, relishing in the warmth the fireplace put out. “Fix me a drink as well.”

Cassio made a low sound, voicing his displeasure, but after a couple of minutes, he held out a tumbler with about an inch of amber liquid. I took it and sipped at it.

Cassio sagged down on the armchair beside mine, rolling around the ice cube in his glass. His eyes were on me. “I knew it would come to this. It couldn’t be any other way. It had to end like this.”

“This isn’t the end of anything,” I said. “Not if you don’t let it. Do you want to lose me?”

Cassio took a gulp then smiled bitterly. “Haven’t I already?”

“No, but you will if you don’t stop hiding the truth from me. What happened today… I can’t get over it unless you tell me what made you act that way. Help me understand.”

Cassio downed the rest of his drink. He stared into the flames and smiled bitterly.

My phone rang, making me jump. Cassio’s expression darkened, but I picked up. I didn’t have to check the screen to know who it was. “I’m fine, Christian.”

“I contacted a few of my loyal men in Baltimore. Dad won’t interfere, but I will if you need me to. Just say it and I’ll free you of him.”

That was betrayal. Considering how bad things were in the Famiglia at the moment, and how volatile Luca was, I couldn’t allow Christian to entertain these ideas. “No. I’m fine, honestly. We can talk tomorrow.”

“Giulia—”

“Tomorrow.” I hung up. “That look needs explaining, Cassio.”

He raised an eyebrow as if he didn’t know what I was talking about. I didn’t believe that for one second. His eyes practically burned with angry jealousy when I talked to Christian. It was something I couldn’t even begin to comprehend.

“How can you even consider that I’d have something with my own brother?” Downing half of my drink, I got up and knelt before him, touching his clenched fist resting on his thigh. He opened it so I could link our fingers. Behind the anger and suspicion in his eyes lingered a deep pain and vulnerability. It was the latter that hushed my own fury over what he’d done. “Please, tell me the truth.”

Cassio bent down and kissed me sweetly.

I frowned. This wasn't the moment for physical closeness. I wanted answers.

"I needed that last kiss before you'll always look at me the way you looked at me when I attacked Christian." He leaned back, looking off into the flames once more. "I killed my first wife."

The ground dropped away under me. Slowly I pulled my hand away from his, wishing I had misunderstood him and terribly certain that I hadn't.

Cassio smiled darkly. He took his time tracing my horrified expression with his eyes. "Not with my own hands. She killed herself, but she did it because of me."

Relief almost knocked the breath out of me. If Cassio had actually killed his wife, I couldn't have stayed with him—not that he'd ever allow me to leave him.

I knew suicide was more common than people liked to admit in our circles, but usually it was the result of abuse and despair. What had Cassio done to his wife? He was good to me and to his kids. I couldn't imagine him abusing his late wife, unless her death had made him change his ways. Even the cut on my arm… even if that hadn't been Christian's doing, it hadn't been his intention. He'd looked guilty afterward.

"Why?" I asked, half scared to know the truth, but I wanted to be rid of the past's dark shadows and shedding light on what happened was the only way to do it.

Cassio smiled without humor. The flames created shadows on his sharp face. "Because I killed the man she loved."

I was shocked into silence.

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SEVENTEEN

Cassio

The Past

This day had been an absolute clusterfuck. Losing two men to those fucking bikers was bad enough. Losing them because we had a rat was worse. I wasn't sure who he was, not with certainty. Many things pointed to Andrea. He hadn't been at Christmas dinner two days ago, but he was supposed to watch Gaia today.

It was close to midnight when I entered our home, expecting everyone in bed as usual. Light streamed into the foyer from the living room. Following it, I found Daniele on the sofa playing on a small tablet, his brows puckered in concentration. I went over to him. "Why are you still up?"

"Can't sleep. Uncle Andrea gave me this."

"Where is he?"

"Upstairs with Mom. They're playing."

He didn't even look up, completely mesmerized by the colorful screen. It was exactly why I hadn't wanted him to have one of these things.

"Playing?"

Daniele nodded distractedly. "Yeah. Uncle Andrea gave me this to play too."

"Stay here and keep playing," I said firmly and walked toward the stairs, drawing my gun. I crept up the stairs, making sure I didn't make a

sound.

In front of the door to Gaia's bedroom, I stopped, listening. Behind the door, someone grunted and a woman cried out. They weren't sounds of torture.

I shoved open the door. It smashed against the wall behind it.

Fury slithered through my veins at the sight before me. Gaia, my heavily pregnant wife, straddled her half-brother, both of them naked.

My wife was fucking her half-brother.

For a second neither of us moved.

Gaia let out a shriek, covering her breasts as if I had less right to see them than her fucking half-brother. A look passed between them, and I knew this had been going on for a long time, maybe longer than she and I had been married.

The bitter taste of betrayal bloomed in my mouth, followed by the irresistible thirst for revenge. I closed the door. Andrea pushed Gaia off him and lunged for the gun on the nightstand. I pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through his palm, blowing it apart. Blood and flesh splattered everywhere.

He roared in agony.

"No!" Gaia shrieked, stumbling to her feet and moving toward the gun. I was by her side in two large steps, wrapped my arms around her ribcage above her belly.

"No!" she shrieked, struggling in my hold. I covered her mouth with my palm and dragged her toward the bathroom. "Stop screaming," I growled. "Daniele doesn't need to hear this."

Her muffled screams didn't cease. She didn't care if our son heard this. I pushed her into the bathroom and locked the door before I turned back to Andrea who was coming out of his pain-induced daze. Gaia hammered against the door. Andrea tried for the gun again. I shot his other hand too, feeling sick satisfaction at his cry of agony. He fell back with a choked cry, holding his ruined hands in front of him.

"Don't hurt Andrea! Don't, Cassio, or I swear I'll kill the child in my womb."

I froze, my eyes slanting to the door, not able to believe what Gaia had said. I stalked into the walk-in closet and grabbed tape and handcuffs before I returned to the bedroom. Andrea wasn't a danger to me in his current state.

I opened the door and Gaia almost fell toward me. The second she saw what I was holding, she stumbled back and grabbed my cutthroat razor,

pressing it to the underside of her belly. “Don’t hurt him, or I’ll cut Simona out of my belly.”

“You’d hurt your daughter for that man?”

“You wouldn’t understand!” she croaked. “I’ve loved him all my life. He’s all that matters.”

“Put the razor down, Gaia, and we can talk.”

“You’ll never let him live. I know you. It’s either him or you.”

“And you want me dead.”

“Yes.” There wasn’t a hint of hesitation in the word. “I’ve wanted you gone for so long. I want nothing more.”

I lunged, grabbing her wrist before she could hurt herself and the baby. Despite her struggles, I managed to tie her feet and hands together and carefully put her down on an array of towels. I covered her mouth with tape so her screams wouldn’t alert Daniele. “I can’t allow you to kill our child.”

Her eyes were frantic as I straightened and left the room. I closed the door with a soft click. Andrea had stumbled to his feet, but I got to him before he could flee. I chained him to the heater with the handcuffs then taped his mouth as well. We’d talk later.

Taking a deep breath, I checked my clothes for blood then changed my shirt before I went downstairs. On the way, I texted Faro that he needed to come over with a doctor who could treat Gaia. I ignored his following questions.

Daniele hovered in the center of the living room, the tablet still in his hand. His small face showed confusion. I smiled despite the darkness swirling in my insides. “You were right. Your mom and Uncle Andrea were playing.”

“I heard screaming.”

I chuckled, even as my throat tightened. “Yeah. They were chasing each other and Mom got startled.”

Heading to his side, I stroked his head. “I’m going to take you to bed now. You can keep playing if you want.”

He nodded. I lifted Daniele and carried him upstairs, relishing the feel of his warm body. He called to the good part of me, a part Andrea wouldn’t get to see today. After I put Daniele in bed, I left and locked his door.

I returned to Gaia’s bedroom. Before I dealt with Andrea, I checked on Gaia again. She still lay where I’d left her. Her eyes begged me to spare Andrea—the man she’d been fucking behind my back for eight years.

I turned my back on her, not able to bear the look in her eyes, and went to Andrea. After unfastening the handcuffs, I grabbed him by one wrist and dragged him after me, enjoying the sound of his muffled cries. He struggled like a madman. I pulled him down the staircase, when Faro entered the lobby with his keys, our most-trustworthy doctor behind him.

Faro's eyes dipped to Andrea's bleeding form, widened, then shot back up to meet my gaze. The doctor's face remained unmoving—he knew the rules. None of what he saw would ever leave this house.

"Gaia's upstairs," I said. "Treat her, make sure she and the child are all right. And don't leave her out of sight for a fucking second. She threatened to hurt the baby."

I didn't wait for a reply. Instead, I wrenched Andrea toward the basement door and shoved him down the stairs. The sound of his fall ended with his muffled cry when he landed at the base. I followed after him. Steps rang out behind me. I didn't have to turn to know it was Faro.

Andrea lay in a crumpled heap at the base of the steps, groaning. I grabbed him again and dragged him toward a soundproof room where I hoisted him onto a chair.

Faro regarded me cautiously. "Is he a rat?"

"Maybe," I said. "But he's a man who fucks his sister."

Faro's eyes shot open wide as he scanned Andrea's naked body. "Cassio __"

"Don't," I growled. I didn't want compassion. It was worth less than the dirt under my shoes. Compassion was for the weak and stupid. Maybe I was the second, but definitely not the first.

"Fuck," Faro said, shaking his head. He knew what would have to happen, what I needed—*wanted* to do.

I stepped close to Andrea and ripped the tape off. "Now we'll talk."

Andrea spat against my chest. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Oh, there is." I grabbed his throat. "How long have you been fucking my wife?"

Andrea smiled grimly. "She's been mine before she was yours."

"What does that mean?" I shook him hard.

His eyes rolled back briefly before they met mine. He'd lost a lot of blood, was losing more with every passing second. He wouldn't leave this basement alive. "We've been together since Gaia was fifteen. We've been fucking since she was sixteen."

Rage boiled up in me like an unstoppable wave. “You’re lying.”

“Why? Because she bled your first time together?” He laughed nastily. “There are doctors for everything.”

Almost eight years. That was how long Gaia had been cheating on me. I’d been faithful even when she hardly tolerated my presence most days and had only slept with me once or twice per month. I didn’t care. I kept my marriage vows, and she trampled on them from day one. I trusted her and Andrea, had let him become her only bodyguard because she asked me to. I didn’t give a fuck about what had happened before our wedding night, if she’d been a virgin or not, but every betrayal since then cut me like an acid-coated knife.

My hands balled to fists.

“Remember the bikers,” Faro said, but I barely heard him. “We need info.”

Andrea swallowed. “If you want an heir, you need to keep Gaia alive because Daniele and Simona aren’t yours. They are mine.”

Static rushed in my ears. I threw myself at him, raining punches down on his face, his chest, his stomach. I beat every inch of him I could reach.

“Cassio, stop!” Faro gripped my shoulders, but I shoved him away with a roar, more animal than man. He collided with the wall and crumpled to his feet.

Then I whirled on Andrea again. His gaze said he knew he would die.

My fists burned with every new punch. I hit flesh and bone, even the floor beneath us in my blinding rage. I punched and punched until I couldn’t breathe anymore, until my knuckles throbbed with pain, until my ribcage ached under an invisible weight. Shoving away from the corpse, I sank down against the wall, chest heaving. My knuckles were split from impact with the stone floor.

I gasped for breath and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I was calm. Andrea was a bloody mess. I didn’t have to check for a pulse to know he was dead. I’d killed many men with a knife, gun, hammer, razorblade, but never with my bare hands. I didn’t let rage dictate my actions. Today I had.

Faro sat across from me, eyeing me warily. “You all right?”

I stretched out my blood-covered arms. My shirt and pants were drenched. My fingers ached when I wiggled them. I smiled wryly. “My wife

has been fucking her half-brother our entire marriage… Daniele…” My words died in my mouth, throat becoming dry.

Faro got up with a wince. He stepped over the corpse and almost slipped on the blood. “Fuck,” he growled before he stopped in front of me. He held out his hand.

I took it and let him pull me up, even as sharp pain sliced through my fingers.

Faro touched my shoulder. “Andrea might have said it to provoke you, Cassio. You don’t know if he said the truth. Daniele and the baby could be yours. Do you really think Gaia would have risked putting cuckoo’s eggs in your nest?”

“Don’t call them that,” I rasped.

Faro regarded me with penetrating intensity that set my teeth on edge. “Andrea knew what awaited him. A slow death, hours of brutal torture until he’d given up all his secrets. By provoking you, he got a quick death.”

I regarded the bloody mess on the floor. “I doubt it was the painless end he’d hoped for.”

“Not painless, no,” Faro said, following my gaze. “But fairly quick. Better than he deserved if you ask me.”

I leaned back against the wall, not sure where to go from here. My wife had betrayed me, had admitted that she’d rather see me dead, had threatened to kill our baby… if it was even *ours*.

My chest constricted until every breath was a struggle.

“What are you going to do now?” Faro asked. I met his cautious gaze. “With Gaia,” he clarified, as if I didn’t know.

“I don’t know.” I couldn’t—wouldn’t kill her. She was still my wife, still the mother of Daniele and Simona. My head fell forward under the force of emotions slamming into me.

“Cassio.” Faro squeezed my shoulder, his voice imploring.

“Call my father. Ask him to come over. He needs to know. Don’t alert anyone else yet. We need to come up with a story.”

“You’ll keep Gaia’s affair a secret?”

“Of course. I don’t want people to know. We’ll blame this on Andrea. Declare him a traitor, as he probably was anyway.”

“Gaia might know more. If she was his lover, they might have talked.”

I shook Faro’s grip off. A new wave of rage and despair rose in me. “I need to check on her.”

“Cassio,” Faro said, gripping my shoulder. “Even if you don’t kill her, you can’t trust her anymore. Your marriage is over.”

I didn’t say anything, only walked up the stairs. I found Gaia and the doctor in her bedroom. She lay in bed, looking drugged. The doctor was covered in sweat and had a swelling on his forehead. “She struggled. I had to sedate her and drag her to bed. She would have hurt herself and the baby otherwise.”

Doctor Sal scanned my blood-covered clothes. “Should I check on your injuries?”

“Is the baby okay?” I asked from the doorway, unable to go in, to go anywhere closer to my wife and the bed she’d betrayed me in.

“It is. Of course, it’s not ideal that I had to sedate her. If she’s still this hysterical when she wakes, we might have to restrain her. I can’t keep giving her sedatives in her state.”

“Can we get the baby now?”

Sal shook his head. “Theoretically. But we should give it another two to three weeks at least.”

How could I make sure the baby was safe? I’d have to keep an eye on Gaia 24/7 and hope she got over Andrea’s death. I knew I was foolish for hoping she could. And really, what could I hope for at this point? That we’d live under a roof, hating each other? Gaia would spend every waking moment wishing for my cruel death, and I’d spend every breath I took resenting her for what she’d done. This marriage was dead. It had been from the very start.

“Stay with her,” I said. I walked out and into the master bedroom where I showered quickly and dressed before I headed to Daniele’s room.

He’d fallen asleep, curled up on his side in bed. Slowly, I walked over to him and sank down on the floor. I stroked his unruly hair. He looked like Gaia. It’s what everyone had been saying from the very start. Her brown eyes and dark-blond hair, even her facial features. He had nothing of me. My sisters and mother had similar dark-blond hair color, so I’d assumed he’d inherited it from them. I closed my eyes. Andrea and Gaia shared very similar looks. If Andrea was Daniele’s father, that explained why he had nothing of me.

Acute pain sliced through my chest. I looked at the little boy I loved more than anything in the world. I’d never loved Gaia, not for herself. I’d

respected and cared for her because she'd given me the purest gift in the world: a child.

I stood abruptly. Voices sounded in the corridor, one of them belonging to Father. I stepped outside, finding Faro and my father talking in urgent whispers. The moment Father looked at me, I wished I could have kept this from him. He limped toward me, looking pale and weak. He gripped my shoulder, his eyes searching mine. "If you want to make Gaia disappear after the baby is born, nobody would blame you, least of all me, my son."

I nodded. It wouldn't be the first time a Made Man killed his wife for cheating. Would things have been different if Gaia hadn't been pregnant? Would I have killed her like I had Andrea? I'd killed women before. The whores the bikers kept around to suck their dicks—but they'd been armed and trying to kill me and my men.

Gaia was still a woman, still my wife, still the mother of Simona and Daniele. I wouldn't kill her unless it was her life against that of my children or mine.

"I don't want her to disappear."

Father looked puzzled. "Faro told me everything. How do you want to keep her around? She's a danger to you."

"I'm not worried about my life but those of my children."

Father glanced at Faro then back at me. "You don't know if they even are your children. You need to have a test as soon as possible."

"And then?" I growled.

Father shrugged as if the matter was easy. "If they aren't yours, we can send Gaia and them to live with her family, and you can find a new wife who can give you children."

Giving away Daniele? Even our unborn baby girl had already lodged herself into my heart since I'd first heard her heartbeat and seen the ultrasound image.

Father clutched my shoulder more tightly. "Cassio, be reasonable. You need an heir. You can't want to raise the children of another man. For God's sake, those kids might be the result of incest. It's sin."

"Sin," I repeated, chuckling bitterly. "I beat a man to death with my bare hands today. I skinned and burned a biker today to get information. I've killed more men than I can remember. We sell drugs, weapons. We blackmail and torture. How can a child be a sin?"

Father lowered his arm. "Let's postpone this discussion to another day."

“There won’t be another discussion, Father. Daniele and Simona are my children, end of story. Anyone who claims otherwise will have to pay the price.” Part of my resolve was cowardice. I was scared of the truth, scared of looking into Daniele’s face and not seeing my son, but Andrea’s. I’d never allow that to happen.

Father straightened. “Don’t forget who you are talking to.”

“I’m not. I respect you. Don’t destroy this by saying something I won’t forgive.”

Father leaned more heavily on his cane, letting out a deep sigh. “If you prefer to live in the dark.”

“The dark is where we’re all most comfortable.” I nodded at Faro. “Get rid of the body.” He inclined his head then turned to do his job. I could always count on him. But trusting him after today? I’d never trust anyone ever again.

My gaze settled on Gaia, whom I could see lying on the bed from my vantage point.

“How will you ever be able to look into her face again after what she’s done?” Father asked.

“I doubt it’ll be an issue. She probably won’t ever look into my face after what I’ve done to Andrea.”

Three weeks later, Simona was born by Cesarean section. Gaia’s emotional state had worsened, so we had to restrain her at night and have her watched every minute of the day, even when she went to the toilet. Elia, Sybil, and Mia took turns keeping an eye on her. I couldn’t even be in the same room with her without her getting hysterical. I gladly avoided her, however. Even though I hadn’t loved her, her betrayal cut me in a way I hadn’t thought possible. My home had been my safe haven, a place where I could relax after grueling workdays, and my children were the light of my life. Now everything was draped in bitter darkness.

Daniele didn’t understand why he couldn’t visit his mother, but I was scared for him and scared of what she’d tell him. Gaia had always been vindictive, and now she had a reason to hate me.

When I held Simona the day after her birth, because Gaia didn’t want me there during labor, I fell in love with that little girl. Blood meant little in this moment, and I’d never allow it to.

Gaia didn’t get over Andrea’s death. I was foolish to think she could for the sake of Daniele and Simona. For a while, she made me believe she did. She took pills that calmed her, and eventually she almost seemed like her old self. Sybil and Mia still had to take over most of the care for Daniele and Simona. But things seemed to be looking up. We managed to play our roles in public, managed to avoid each other behind closed doors. Sometimes we settled for politeness, but the hatred in Gaia’s eyes always reminded me of the reality of our situation. I’d killed the man she loved. She would never forgive me, and I didn’t need her forgiveness. I only needed her to find it in her to take care of our children.

But Gaia focused most of her love and attention on the last gift from Andrea: Loulou. She treated the dog as if it was a human, lavished it with tenderness and loving words she should have given only Daniele and Simona.

I didn’t allow her to be alone with our children. Sybil or Mia had to be around because I still wasn’t sure if Gaia wouldn’t kill our children just to hurt me as much as Andrea’s death hurt her. I never considered her capable of infanticide, but now I wasn’t so sure. Images of my children’s lifeless bodies haunted my nightmares.

We lived a lie, which became more and more unbearable every day, but at the same time, I got used to it.

Four months after Simona’s birth, on the day of our eighth anniversary, Gaia ended it all. I’d made dinner reservations in our favorite restaurant for appearance’s sake, but the moment I came home I knew something was wrong.

It was awfully quiet in the house. Too silent. I was a man who enjoyed the quiet, but this kind of silence rang too loudly, bounced off the walls in ominous echoes.

I found Sybil asleep on the sofa. Shaking her, she came to but her eyes remained unfocused. “I’m sorry, master. I must have fallen asleep.”

“That’s not just sleep. I told you to be wary around Gaia!” I snarled, releasing her. “Where are Daniele and Simona?”

Sybil blinked, then her eyes widened with fear. I began running up the stairs then froze on the second-floor landing. Small bloody paw prints

covered the beige carpet.

My heart clenched so tightly, for a moment I was sure I had a heart attack. It ran in our family, after all. I stormed toward Simona's bedroom, ripping the door open, then stumbled toward the crib. Simona lay unmoving and everything in me stilled. In the one second I considered her death, I understood why Gaia wanted to kill herself after losing Andrea. I wrenched Simona up so fast, she came awake with an ear-splitting scream. God, it was the most beautiful sound in the world. I clutched her to my chest despite her relentless cries and kissed the top of her head over and over again.

Loulou barked then squeaked. Simona in my arms, I walked out of the room. Daniele stood in the corridor a few steps from his mother's bedroom, clamping Loulou against his chest. The dog squirmed wildly. As I came closer, I saw its fur was covered in blood and so was its muzzle. Daniele's arms, too, were red. I rushed toward him and knelt down, holding Simona in one arm as I touched his cheek. "Daniele, what happened?" My fingers flew over his small body, looking for injuries, but he was unscathed.

"Found Loulou. Where's Mom?"

The dog snapped wildly until Daniele finally dropped it. It rushed through the crack of the door into Gaia's bedroom. Daniele made a move as if to follow. I grabbed his wrist. Cold dread pierced my every bone. "No. Were you in there?"

"Mom was asleep. Is she awake now?"

My throat clogged up. "No. She's still sleeping. Go downstairs to Sybil. She needs to clean you."

Daniele jutted his chin out. "I want Mom."

"Daniele, go downstairs."

Slowly, he backed away then disappeared down the stairs. Simona had quieted in my hold. She was too small to understand, and yet I couldn't take her into the bedroom with me knowing what I'd find.

I returned her to her crib before I slowly made my way to Gaia's bedroom. Pushing open the door, I slipped inside. A familiar scent drifted into my nose; it had never meant anything to me, but from this day on it would. Even knowing what I'd find, the sight slammed into me like a punch to the gut. I approached the bed slowly. One of Gaia's arms hung limply down the side of the bed, still dripping blood onto the hardwood floor. Loulou perched beneath it, licking the sticky fingertips eagerly. It sat in a

puddle of blood—the amount of which told me that I didn’t have to call an ambulance. My business required I knew how much blood a human body could lose before I needed to take countermeasures to prevent a premature death—before all the necessary information was extracted from the person.

Gaia was gone.

Blood kept dripping down on Loulou, and the goddamn thing kept licking it up eagerly. Enraged, I snatched the dog up by its neck, staggered toward the door, and tossed it into the hallway. It landed with a squeak before it dashed off.

I stared down at my blood-covered hands then at the lifeless body of my wife. Slowly, I closed the door in case Daniele came by. A bloody handprint remained on the white-lacquered wood.

Daniele didn’t need to see more of this. I turned back to the gruesome scene. The red roses one of the maids had bought for Gaia as a gift for our eighth anniversary lay crumpled beside the limp body. Red roses to match the blood-stained sheets and her white dress. A desperate attempt to mend a marriage that couldn’t be mended. Proof of my own failure.

Seconds ticked by as I regarded my wife. Even lifeless, she was still beautiful. She’d chosen to wear her wedding dress when she killed herself. It still fit her perfectly. The crystals on her bodice glittered in the glow of the lamp. A few of them were sprinkled with blood, making them appear like rubies. They matched the gemstones in her necklace. She’d even curled her hair the same way she’d worn it on the day we made our vows. How long had she planned this?

Picking up my phone, I called Father. I rarely called him after dinnertime. He and Mother spent their evenings watching classics or playing backgammon. Now that he’d retired, they had time for it. Their love had been something I strived for as a young man, before marriage, before Gaia.

“Cassio, don’t you have a dinner reservation with Gaia?”

A dinner to flaunt our failed marriage in public. “Gaia is dead.”

Silence. “Can you repeat that?”

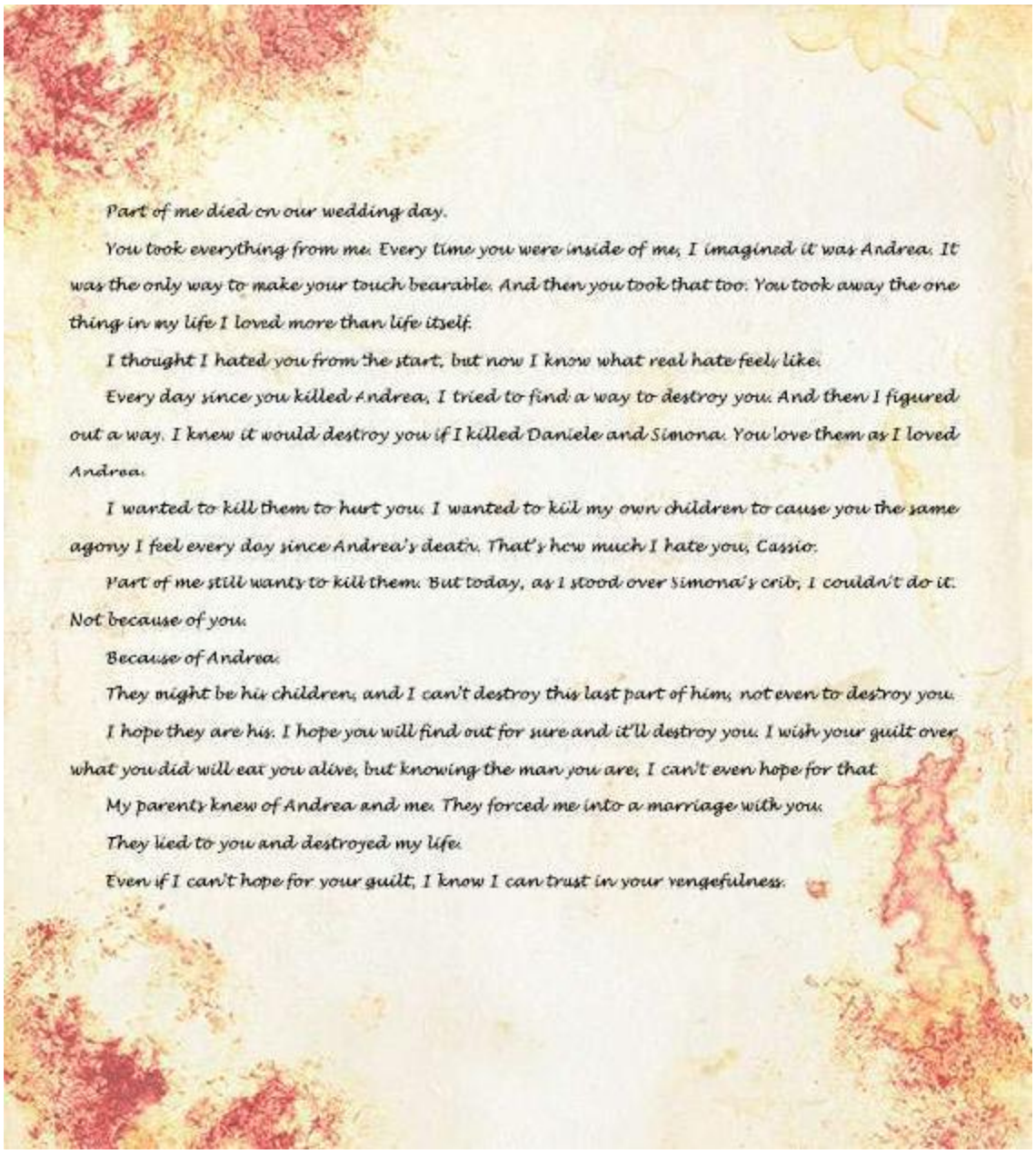
“Gaia is dead.”

“Cassio—”

“Someone needs to clean this up before the kids see it. Send a clean-up crew and inform Luca.”

I hung up. A sheet of paper on the bed beside Gaia’s body caught my eye. I crept toward the bed. Death didn’t bother me, not when I was the harbinger of it so often, but every fiber of my being revolted against going anywhere near the corpse of my wife. The opposite arm that wasn’t hanging off the side of the bed was draped over her chest. The blood from the slit wrist had soaked the fabric of her wedding dress. Her lifeless brown eyes fixed on the ceiling, even in death they were full of accusation. I closed her eyelids then picked up her last letter with shaking fingertips.

Her elegant handwriting and the expensive stationery promised a love letter, but of course it was nothing like that.



Part of me died on our wedding day.

You took everything from me. Every time you were inside of me, I imagined it was Andrea. It was the only way to make your touch bearable. And then you took that too. You took away the one thing in my life I loved more than life itself.

I thought I hated you from the start, but now I know what real hate feels like.

Every day since you killed Andrea, I tried to find a way to destroy you. And then I figured out a way. I knew it would destroy you if I killed Daniele and Simona. You love them as I loved Andrea.

I wanted to kill them to hurt you. I wanted to kil my own children to cause you the same agony I feel every day since Andrea's death. That's how much I hate you, Cassio.

Part of me still wants to kill them. But today, as I stood over Simona's crib, I couldn't do it. Not because of you.

Because of Andrea.

They might be his children, and I can't destroy this last part of him, not even to destroy you.

I hope they are his. I hope you will find out for sure and it'll destroy you. I wish your guilt over what you did will eat you alive, but knowing the man you are, I can't even hope for that.

My parents knew of Andrea and me. They forced me into a marriage with you.

They lied to you and destroyed my life.

Even if I can't hope for your guilt, I know I can trust in your vengefulness.

My breathing had slowed as I read Gaia's letter to me. I couldn't move, could only stare down at her last words. I wasn't sad about losing her. I'd never had her to begin with. She'd been Andrea's, even after his death. I felt a deep sadness over what this meant for Daniele and Simona and a raging madness toward the people who were responsible for this mess. Toward her parents who'd forced her into a marriage with me, even though they'd known the truth. It was incest. Their love had been doomed like ours, but

her parents had let me run into an open knife, hadn't warned me when I allowed Andrea to spend every day alone with my wife.

A knock sounded but I didn't react. The door opened then. Faro slipped in and appeared beside me. He said something but his words were muffled. He took the letter from me. I let him. It didn't matter if he read it.

"Cassio!" He shook me hard, and finally my focus snapped to him. Behind him, my father leaned heavily on his walking stick, looking furious as he scanned the letter.

"Don't you dare feel guilty, Cassio," he muttered. "That's what she wanted. She cheated on you, probably helped her brother leak information to the bikers, tried to kill your children. She's not worth a flicker of your guilt."

Faro met my gaze. "You didn't choose to marry her either. You both were thrown into this marriage for tactical purposes. You aren't any guiltier than she is."

And yet I felt it. "I don't know how much Daniele saw of this."

Father grimaced. "He won't understand either way."

"I locked that damn dog into the storage room. It was covered in blood," Faro said.

I nodded distractedly, but my gaze returned to Gaia. My wife had killed herself because of me. I'd been the final nail in her coffin, but her parents had built the fucking thing.

"Take care of everything," I said. "I need to deal with something."

Father gripped my arm. "Son, tell me you won't do anything foolish?" I rarely saw fear in his eyes, but there it was.

"Not the kind of foolishness you fear. It's an act of cowardice and a crime toward the ones left behind." I ripped away from his grip and stalked away.

Faro hurried after me. "Do you need my help?"

"No."

I took the car. Twenty minutes later, I knocked at my in-laws' house. When they opened the door, I pointed my gun at them. "Let's talk about Andrea and Gaia."

The next day, their maid found them dead in their bedroom. They'd shot themselves, unable to bear the death of their son and daughter. That was the official statement.

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EIGHTEEN

Cassio

The present

Slowly, I turned away from the fireplace, facing my young wife. She was pale, her lips parted in horror after my story. “When I married Gaia, she was in love with her half-brother. I didn’t know it back then. Her parents did but chose not to divulge the information. Maybe now you understand why I was wary of Christian.”

Giulia covered her mouth with her palm, staring down at the floor as if she couldn’t bear looking at me. I couldn’t blame her. It was a story that had shaken up even my father and Faro. “Oh my God.”

I grimaced. I hated remembering, and worse speaking about what happened, but even worse than all that was the look on Giulia’s face now that she knew the truth. “After I married Gaia, she asked me if her half-brother could become one of her bodyguards. I agreed because she was miserable away from home and I thought it would help. I wanted her to find happiness in our marriage.”

Giulia nodded, not looking up. “Her parents? You killed them.”

“I did. They betrayed me. Their lies cost Gaia and Andrea their life.”

She sucked in a sharp breath, horrified. Giulia was a good girl. Kind and positive, willing to see the light even in the dark. I’d dragged one woman into an abyss. I desperately hoped Giulia would be spared the same fate. “Gaia practically asked you to kill them in her last letter.”

“She knew me well.” Occasionally I would share details of my work with her when I’d been particularly shaken or when she asked, which didn’t happen often.

Giulia shook her head. She’d said our marriage would be doomed if I didn’t tell her the truth, but I had a feeling the truth just ended whatever had been blossoming between us. Losing Gaia hadn’t hurt. For one, because she’d betrayed me, and because I’d never loved her. Losing Giulia—I wouldn’t get over it. We hadn’t been together long, but in the weeks of our marriage, she’d brightened my days more than I thought possible.

“I never raised my hand against Gaia, not then either. I would have never killed her. Whatever you decide, you don’t have to worry about your safety, Giulia. I won’t hurt you.”

I couldn’t breathe. Hearing Cassio tell the story of what happened in a raw, bitter voice had unsettled me deeply. This was so much worse than I expected. The idea of finding Cassio with another woman tore at me. How much worse must it have been for him? Finding his pregnant wife with her half-brother, a man he trusted, and finding out his children might not even be his. It was too horrific to contemplate. Even I wasn’t sure what I would have done in a situation like that. Probably not killed someone, but I wasn’t a man raised to survive in the mafia.

Cassio smiled grimly seeing my expression. “That’s the man you married, Giulia. I understand if you’re scared of me now. I won’t stop you from moving into another bedroom, but you’ll certainly understand that we’ll have to stay married for Simona and Daniele. They can’t lose you too.”

I pushed to my feet, crawled on Cassio's lap, and wrapped my arms around him even as he stiffened. I kissed him hard. God, this was horrible. Everything. It wasn't okay that Cassio had killed a man in a jealous rage, but he was a killer, and he, like all the men in our world, had killed for less. Part of me understood.

Confusion mingled with hesitant hope in Cassio's eyes. "What… what are you doing?"

I pressed my face against his throat. He wrapped an arm around me lightly. "Giulia? Say something."

"I'm not scared of you." I wasn't. Maybe I should have been, but I'd always known Cassio was capable of brutality for something as trivial as power and money. That he killed because someone hurt him, it only showed he wasn't an emotionless killer.

Cassio slipped a finger under my chin and nudged my face up. "You heard what I said."

"I did. You protected Daniele and Simona. You kept Gaia alive despite what she did. I know it isn't something many men would have done. It's more than I expected, knowing the stories about you."

Cassio's mouth twisted cynically. "I suppose it's good that your impression of me was already bad to begin with."

I rolled my eyes, hoping to lighten the mood.

Cassio cupped my cheek. "Only you make me feel better by insulting me with a simple look."

I gripped his shoulders, bringing our faces closer. "You wanted to let the past rest, and I want to help you. Stop thinking I'm going to do what Gaia did. I'm not her, and I definitely won't end up in bed with my brother. Even thinking about it makes me sick. And I won't cheat on you with anyone else either. I desire you, and I'm loyal. Can you get it through your thick skull?"

Cassio pointed at his chest. "In here, I know you aren't Gaia." He pointed at his head. "Up here's the problem. I'm not a very trusting man, never have been. Now less than ever. But I'm trying." He cupped my head and molded our mouths together before murmuring, "I can't lose you."

"You won't. Not if you keep working on your trust issues, if you keep fighting for us, because I sure as hell am ready to go into war for this marriage and our children."

Cassio moved back slowly. "What did you say?"

I pursed my lips. "That I'm ready to fight for us."

“No,” he said gruffly. “You said *our* children.”

I flushed. Not only had I almost declared my feelings for Cassio, I’d also let it slip that I wanted Simona and Daniele to be ours, not just his. I’d known them for only a month, but I’d be at their side for many years. Hopefully one day they’d be mine in theirs and everyone else’s opinion. “I know they are yours… not mine, not really, but it kind of hurts if you say they are your children as if I don’t care for them—” Cassio jerked me toward him, kissing me fiercely. I clung to him, almost breathless when he finally pulled away.

“I don’t deserve you, Giulia, but my kids… *our* kids do.”

“I really, really care about them. Even if you never want to have another child, I’ll be okay because I’m going to raise them as if they were my own.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “It’s what I’d do too.”

I searched his eyes. “Have you ever had a paternity test done?” I was fairly sure I knew the answer.

“No,” Cassio said.

That one word encompassed so much emotion. Love for Simona and Daniele, the determination to take care of them, but also the fear. “So you don’t know if Daniele and Simona are yours?”

“No. Simona and Daniele look like their mother… like…”

Like Gaia’s half-brother. “But their hair color is similar to your sister’s’.”

“It is,” he agreed, but doubt rang in his voice and I understood why. Now that I really thought about it, I had to admit that neither Simona nor Daniele shared any resemblance with their father. My heart hurt thinking of the possibility.

I swallowed. “Why?”

“Because I love them and I’m fucking scared the test results might change that. Especially Daniele… I can’t bear the thought that I might resent him for looking like Andrea.” His voice shook.

“You really think you’d love Daniele less if he wasn’t yours?”

“I don’t know,” Cassio admitted in a raw voice. “I don’t fucking know, which is why I won’t risk it. I’d rather not know the truth, rather live a lie than hurt Daniele or Simona in any way.”

I cupped his cheeks. “They are your children, Cassio.”

“You can’t know—”

“They are. Because you love them, because you raise them, and because they love you as their father. That’s what matters.”

“Yeah,” he said after a moment. “How can you be this goddamn wise and kind, Giulia? I should be the one giving you advice. I’m almost twice your age for God’s sake.”

I shrugged. “I had to grow up quickly.”

Cassio stroked my bangs away from my forehead, wistfulness clouding his face. “Because of me. I thought you were another child to take care of after our first encounter, too young to deal with the responsibilities being my wife entailed, but you proved me wrong. You take care of my children, of that dog, even of me.”

“Loulou. That’s her name.”

“Andrea gave her to Gaia a few weeks before I found out.”

“Oh.” That explained why he could hardly look at Loulou. She reminded him of too many hurtful things. “It’s not her fault.”

“She licked up Gaia’s blood!”

I cringed, not wanting to ponder that disturbing image. “She’s a dog. She doesn’t mean any harm.”

Cassio tilted his head to the side with a tired smile. “You can keep her, but don’t expect me to bond with that thing.”

I stifled a comeback. Some things took time. I rubbed my fingertips over Cassio’s stubbled cheek and chin. “Do you know why Daniele avoids you? Did he see anything?”

“He wasn’t present when I killed Andrea or during my fight with Gaia.” He reached for his glass, took a long gulp. “Right after Andrea’s death, he was still okay. But in the weeks that followed, he pulled back, and then after Gaia’s suicide, I couldn’t get through to him. Daniele resents me. I can see it in his eyes. We used to be close, but everything changed… He won’t talk so I don’t know if it’s something Gaia said to him or something he saw.”

I pressed my forehead to his. “We’ll find out together. For us. For our kids.”

Knowing what I did now, goose bumps covered my skin when I found Daniele in his mother's bedroom the next morning. I could almost see her lying there from the vivid and raw way Cassio had described the scene. A lump rose in my throat, seeing Daniele curled up on his side. I wished I knew what was going on in his head, if he'd seen more than Cassio suspected. I approached Daniele slowly, trying to get the images out of my head. How much worse must Cassio feel whenever he set foot inside this room?

I picked Daniele up and he woke in my arms. It was easy to carry him since he wasn't a baby anymore. Cassio came out of the nursery with Simona on his arm. He tousled Daniele's hair gently, but he ducked his head.

I gave Cassio an encouraging smile.

"I'll be home in time for dinner," he promised before he left.

Like every day, Elia drove the kids, Loulou, and me to the dog park. Daniele was allowed to take the leash as we strolled through the rest of the park later in the day. He hadn't even asked for his tablet today. Loulou requested all his attention, and he gave it gladly. It was wonderful seeing them grow closer.

Elia settled on the bench while I held Simona by her tiny hands so she could take hesitant steps along the pathway. Daniele perched on the ground, helping Loulou dig a hole in the cold ground with a stick he'd found. He was dirty, and digging holes in the park was probably prohibited, but I didn't stop him.

"Loulou."

I froze and almost let go of Simona, which earned me an angry cry from her, but my eyes were locked on Daniele who'd just spoken. Not to me, and not loudly, but I'd heard the word. I swallowed hard, trying to decide if I should try to coerce more words out of him. He had a small, soft voice, and I wanted to hear it all day.

I decided against pushing him, even if it was difficult. Instead, I peered down at Simona. "Good girl." She grinned and took a couple more shaky steps.

The moment we were home, and I had a bit of free time, I picked up my phone and called Cassio. I couldn't wait. He answered after the first ring. "What happened?" The tight worry in his voice made me regret my decision.

“Everything’s fine. I just wanted to tell you that Daniele talked to Loulou today.”

Silence. “You sure?” Every syllable rang with doubt.

“Yes, I heard him say her name. Isn’t that great? We’re making progress.”

“Why would he talk to a dog?”

“Many children develop close bonds to their pets because they can share everything with them without judgment or punishment. They are their best friends.”

“It doesn’t explain why he’s so obsessed with that dog.”

And then it clicked. “For Gaia it reminded her of Andrea, but for Daniele, it only reminds him of his mother, and that’s natural. If he finds comfort in Loulou, that’s good.”

Cassio sighed. “Maybe. I need to return to work now.”

“All right. Will you still be home for dinner?”

“I promised, so yes.”

“Thank you. I enjoy having dinner with you.” I quickly hung up, not wanting to get too mushy.

Cassio asked me to put Daniele to bed that night. He looked exhausted and as if he couldn’t bear his son’s rejection one more time.

After tucking Daniele in, I picked up one of the picture books I’d ordered and began to read it to him, but his focus was on Loulou who’d curled up in front of the bed. I patted the mattress. “Come on, Loulou.”

Her ears perked, and she jumped up onto the comforter between Daniele and me. His tiny fingers found her fur, and he kept stroking her as I read the book to him. “Do you want Loulou to stay with you?”

Daniele nodded.

“But if you walk around the house, you’ll wake her. Can you stay in your own bed?”

He considered that, his head tilted to the side, then he gave a decisive nod. I smiled before pressing a kiss to his forehead. Turning on his dim nightlight, I walked to the door and extinguished the lamp.

“Goodnight, Daniele.” I began to close the door when a soft voice rang out.

“G’night.”

I froze. Slowly, I turned around, but Daniele hid under his covers. I swallowed and left. As if in trance, I headed downstairs, finding Cassio in the cigar lounge, setting up the pool table for our game. One look at my face and he came toward me. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Daniele said good night.”

Cassio took a step back. “He talked to you?” Surprise mixed with disappointment in his voice. First Loulou, now me.

“He only said good night, but it’s a start, right?”

He nodded slowly, but I could tell it hit him hard that Daniele spoke to me first. I wrapped my arms around his middle. “You’re gone a lot, so Loulou, Simona, and I are the people he relates to. You should make time to take a walk in the dog park with us or have lunch. When you see him, he’s always tired and not in the right mindset to bond with you.”

“We could spend his birthday at the beach house. Daniele loves it there.”

I grinned. “That’s perfect. I want to bake a cake and decorate everything with dinosaurs. Maybe we can invite Mia and her family so Daniele has someone to play with. Her daughters are close to him in age, right?”

“One’s a year younger, the other is two years older. And that sounds like a great plan.” He brushed my bangs away from my forehead.

“Do you still hate them?” I remembered what he’d said about my hair the first time I met him. It had hurt back then but not so much now. Our tastes were very different. At least Cassio had by now mostly given up dressing me the way he wanted.

“There’s nothing I hate about you,” he murmured.

My heart thudded wildly. I scanned his face, trying to determine what the tone in his voice meant. His lips found mine, halting my thoughts. His kiss became forceful as he gripped my hips and hoisted me on the pool table. I squealed in surprise. Cassio positioned my butt right on the edge and pushed my legs apart. It was horribly uncomfortable, but I’d be damned if I said anything. My short plaid skirt rode up. “What about my skirts? You don’t hate them either?”

Cassio licked a hot, wet trail up my inner thigh. I squirmed, stifling a giggle. Part of me wanted to shove him away, but the other wanted more.

“Not as long as they allow me quick access to your sweet pussy.”

He kissed me through my panties.

“You’re really into oral.” I pushed up on my elbows to see him between my legs. He always went down on me before sex and sometimes just because. He didn’t rush it either. He took his time, and it was amazing. Seeing him enjoy it as much as I did was a major turn-on.

“Fuck yes. I could eat you all day.” He dipped his tongue between my folds, my panties still between us. “Is that a complaint?”

I grasped his short hair, trying to push him back down so he’d lick me. Talking was the last thing on my mind. “Absolutely not. Your tongue is magic.”

He chuckled and the deep rumble caused another flood of wetness to trickle out of me. He hooked his fingers in my panties and dragged them down slowly. I lifted my butt to make it easier for him then spread my legs wider. “What about you, honey, do you like to get on your knees and suck my cock?”

“Yes,” I pressed out, sliding closer to his mouth. He smirked. Instead of his tongue, his index finger began to tease me lightly. He dipped it in, drawing out my arousal. “You want me this badly that you’re going to ruin the pool table.”

“I don’t care. Please stop teasing me. I need your tongue.”

His smile turned darker. “Do you remember when I told you that only I give orders in the bedroom?”

“We’re not in our bedroom,” I squeaked before he lifted me off the table, spun me around, and pushed me forward so I was bent over the edge, my butt jutting out. He slapped my ass hard causing me to arch with a gasped moan. His zipper hissed. He palmed my ass, his tip parting my cheeks slowly until I felt him against my opening, and then he slammed all the way in.

I braced myself on the green surface as Cassio thrust into me.

“You always eat me out,” I managed. “You don’t need me to order you to do it.”

His chest pressed against my back. “Even now I’m hungry for your sweetness.” He slammed harder into me, causing the balls in front of me to clank against each other. He drove himself even deeper into me, and the triangle with the balls actually jerked. And that was all it took, this visual of Cassio’s visceral taking of me, to send me over the edge, spinning me out of

control so fast my vision tunneled, focusing on the bright green fabric as my nails scraped over it. My release hit me like a wrecking ball, and I dropped my head on the table, trying to draw in breaths as my body quaked.

Cassio pulled out of me. I gasped and my walls constricted from the unexpected loss. I could feel cold air hit my wet flesh. Then his tongue was against me, heating it up. He lapped at me carefully, knowing I was still overly sensitive. I became slack on top of the table, suspended by its edge as my legs gave in.

Soon the pleasure built again, and he became hungrier, the lapping turning to a thrashing. I lost all sense of time then, letting Cassio take control, letting him give me pleasure and take his own until I felt almost delirious. We both ended up sprawled on the pool table afterward, breathing harshly. I was fairly sure I'd have rug burn and a few bruises tomorrow, but I couldn't care less.

"Sometimes I wonder what I'll tell Daniele once he's older and demands answers. He'll wonder why half his family died."

I turned toward him then rolled over and propped myself up on his chest, my chin on my linked fingers. "You sound guilty."

"Sometimes I feel guilty."

"You had to kill Andrea. Even if you hadn't killed him in a fit of rage, you'd have to kill him for being a traitor."

"I never got confirmation. I didn't question him nor Gaia. I should have, but I killed him before I could torture the truth out of him. And her… I simply couldn't press information out of her like that. She wouldn't have told me anything anyway."

I gnawed on my lower lip. "Andrea was a traitor. Everything pointed to it, so his death was inevitable. Gaia's death was a result of their forbidden affair and thus was inevitable too. It was her choice, and you couldn't do anything to stop it."

"I killed Daniele's and Simona's grandparents also."

"Daniele is going to ask questions one day, and we'll answer them. We'll tell him Andrea was a traitor who ran away. His betrayal broke his sister's heart, so she killed herself, and their parents couldn't live having lost both their children. It's a story few people could challenge and those that could, won't."

His palm caressed my back. "I didn't think you'd be someone who'd opt for a lie."

“If it protects you and the kids.”

Cassio sighed, his strong chest rising under my chin. “First, he’ll have to forgive me for whatever it is he holds against me.”

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NINETEEN

Two days before Daniele’s birthday, when it was certain we would spend the weekend in the beach house, I called Mia. I hadn’t talked to her since the wedding and only exchanged the occasional short texts of pleasantries.

“Giulia, what a pleasure. Is everything all right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Of course?” Her curiosity was unmistakable. I wondered how much she really knew about the reason for Gaia’s death. Judging by Cassio’s words, she only knew the basics.

“We’ll be spending the weekend at the beach to celebrate Daniele’s birthday, and I was wondering if you and your family would join us. Or is it too strenuous for you?” Mia’s due date was in only three weeks, so I wasn’t sure if she wanted to risk even a short trip.

“He’s taking you there already?”

I frowned. “We already spent a weekend in the house.”

“Oh. That’s wonderful, Giulia.”

Her joyous surprise caught me off guard. I thought the house was for the family, not just Cassio.

“And of course we’ll join you. Do you want me to ask Ilaria and my parents if they want to come too?”

“Yes,” I said, relieved. I had even less interaction with them and would have felt awkward calling them out of the blue, especially Cassio’s parents.

It was cold but sunny when we arrived at the beach house on Friday afternoon. Cassio had gotten Daniele's present, which surprised me. My mother had always taken care of buying us things, but I was glad that he was trying to be involved with his kids.

After we settled in, I began assembling the ingredients for the birthday cake. Cassio scanned the display as he came up behind me. He was dressed in chinos that accentuated his long muscular legs, and his sweater did nothing to hide his broad chest. His aftershave, a spicy scent that always filled me with astonishing warmth, reached my nose, and I had to resist the urge to lean back into him. So far, we hadn't shared any kind of intimacy in front of the kids, and I wouldn't initiate anything.

"What's all this for?" Cassio asked. With his body shielding me, he brushed his hand along my side, coming to rest on my hip for a brief squeeze, before he stepped back.

"A funfetti rainbow cake."

I could see his confusion. Before doing online research, I hadn't known such a cake either. I smiled. "You'll see." Daniele hovered in front of the terrace door, peering out toward the beach. Loulou sat beside him, her gaze locked on the seagulls roaming the sky. "Maybe you can take a walk on the beach with him, so he doesn't see his cake before tomorrow?"

Cassio's dark brows snapped together. "I can try."

Simona crawled toward us then, using my leg to pull herself up. After her initial suspicion toward me, she now barely left my side. "I didn't think Daniele and Simona would take to you so quickly."

"I suppose it's an advantage they're so young." Too young to really understand what had happened, especially Simona.

"Yeah." Cassio regarded Daniele.

"Why don't you take Loulou with you?"

Cassio's expression morphed to reluctance at once.

"Hear me out," I said before he could argue. "Daniele loves her. If Loulou trusts you, maybe Daniele will too. I think it's why he started trusting me."

“That dog won’t let me anywhere near it. It’s a miracle the thing stopped snapping at me.”

Lifting Simona up, who kept tugging on my skirt, I faced Cassio. He peered down at me and his daughter, and his expression became softer. “You could start by calling it Loulou. Give it a try. Please.”

He frowned, shaking his head, then leaned down and kissed me, catching me by surprise. Simona made grabby hands for his chin, and he snatched her fingers up with his mouth, causing her to giggle. When he pulled back, my gaze found Daniele, but he still stood with his nose practically touching the window. “All right. But won’t Loulou run off once she’s outside with me?”

“She might. Keep her on a leash.”

I grabbed the leash on the way to the window front. Cassio followed close behind. It was strange seeing a man as tough and as used to ruling over fellow mobsters at a loss on how to handle a small boy. I supposed it was easier keeping dangerous men in line than gaining back the trust of a little boy. It wasn’t something he could force, coerce, or demand. I put Loulou on the leash, and Daniele looked up at once. “You and your dad take Loulou out for a walk.”

Daniele’s head rose even higher, peering up at Cassio.

“Come on, it’s cold outside. Let’s put on your snowsuit,” he said. He picked up Daniele, who remained quiet. Five minutes later, Daniele was dressed in his warm suit, and Cassio had tossed on a coat. I held the leash out to him. He took it in a way that made it clear he’d never held one in his life. The moment I opened the door, Daniele and Loulou slipped out. Cassio followed them, ignoring Loulou’s tugging toward the beach. I watched them for a moment until they reached the ocean. It was such a beautiful sight. Cassio’s enormous frame and beside him a tiny fluffy dog and a small boy…

I didn’t have much experience baking, so I could only hope everything would work out. At least I had experience painting, so maybe food coloring would *literally* be a piece of cake.

Simona sat in her high chair so she could watch me. Usually she preferred to stay mobile, but watching me bake a cake seemed to grab much of her attention. I split the dough into three parts and colored each differently. After covering it with buttercream, I sprinkled everything with funfetti.

Simona was obviously fascinated by the colorful sprinkles and made grabby hands, but I didn't want her to choke on the tiny pieces. I put the finished cake into the fridge then grabbed Simona, wrapped us both in a thick wool coat, and walked out onto the porch. Despite the blistering cold, Daniele played in the sand. Cassio sat on the edge of a lounge chair right beside him, typing on his phone and darting the occasional glance at his son. Loulou perched right beside Daniele, her nose lifted into the breeze. I walked down the wooden steps to the beach.

Cassio's head swiveled around, alertness brimming in his body until he leveled his gaze on me and Simona. He relaxed and put his phone back into his coat jacket. "Done with the cake?"

I nodded with a smile as I took in the heaps of sand around Daniele, who looked completely concentrated on the task ahead. "Your sister and her family will be here in an hour. We should get ready." Looking at Daniele's sand-covered state, cleaning would probably take a while.

Cassio straightened then squatted before Daniele, who briefly glanced up. "Aunt Mia comes to visit. We need to clean you up." He grabbed Daniele gently and lifted him to his feet then began to brush the sand from his thick snowsuit. Daniele didn't protest, his lips pressed together. He kept peeking at Cassio and in his eyes, I saw the same longing I so often caught in Cassio's.

"Ready to go in?" I asked.

Daniele nodded and together we walked back. Cassio cleaned up Daniele. There were fewer protests than in the past. Daniele missed his dad too. I cleaned the kitchen and set the table, glad I'd agreed to Mia's suggestion that they bring takeout. Cooking and baking would have been too much with my limited experience.

Mia had become even rounder since the last time I saw her at the wedding. Her husband Emiliano was Cassio's age and only briefly shook my hand before he joined Cassio for an apéritif. Mia's two daughters were five and two and absolutely adorable with their pigtails and cute dresses. "How's the baby?"

Mia touched her belly. “He’s good.”

“He?”

Mia smiled, but Emiliano spoke before she could. “It’s a boy.” His relief and enthusiasm were unmistakable. Men in our circles still needed an heir. I took the takeout from Mia and carried it over to the table, a bit peeved that Emiliano had allowed Mia to hold it even if it wasn’t that heavy.

“She’s getting quick,” Mia said with a nod toward Simona, who had perfected speed-crawling.

“She’s already trying to walk.”

Mia touched my shoulder, lowering her voice. “You look good. So I take it everything is going well between Cassio and you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad. He and the kids deserve a break.”

It had been a while since I’d had a family dinner at the beach house. I could tell how immensely pleased Mia was over this new development. She’d been trying to convince me to do one for months.

Emiliano joined me for a quick Negroni before dinner. I caught him looking at Giulia in a way that set my teeth on edge. He wouldn’t make a move. His self-preservation was strong. He checked out every attractive woman, and unfortunately, he didn’t stop there. He cheated on Mia in every pregnancy so far. The first time I’d found out, I threatened him, told him I’d cut his dick into tiny pieces if he didn’t stop, but Mia had asked me to stay out of her marriage. She loved him and preferred to pretend he wasn’t cheating. I honored her wish, and Emiliano worked harder to keep his adultery a secret. Mia had a six sense for infidelity had immediately known when I found out about Gaia’s affair, but I’d never told her with whom.

Giulia was the only person I'd told every detail. I wasn't even sure why. My father and Faro were the obvious choices for such a confession, but with Giulia, I felt a stronger connection despite our age difference. We were complete opposites, from our outlook on life to our experiences to our level of goodness and respective badness, but we complemented each other.

Mia gave me a proud look from her spot at the table as if she could read my mind. She'd been against Gaia from the start and in favor of Giulia from the first moment she spotted her. She was right about my first wife, and I hoped she would be with Giulia as well.

The next morning, I woke shortly after sunset, wanting to wake Daniele like I'd done for his last two birthdays, but his bed was empty. I found him on the floor in front of the windows, throwing the dog's ball so she could chase it. His tosses weren't very far or well-aimed, but the look of determined concentration followed by delight on his face tightened my chest. "Happy birthday."

Daniele jumped, dropping the ball. It rolled toward me then bumped against my bare foot. Loulou didn't dare take it. I picked it up then rolled it over the ground toward Daniele. He took it and tossed it again. Loulou returned it to him eagerly. Daniele took the ball and looked down at it. "We'll open your presents once Giulia and Simona are awake."

He held up the ball. It took me a moment to realize why. I approached him slowly, worried he'd change his mind, then grabbed the ball and tossed it through the room for Loulou. She dashed after it as if she was possessed then returned with it. This time she dropped it in front of me. I sank down beside Daniele and held the ball out to him. "Your turn."

He met my gaze for the first time in many months. His eyes were questioning, and if he'd just ask, I'd tell him whatever he needed to hear. He curled his small fingers around the ball then threw it. We spent a long time like this until Loulou was panting and eventually carried her ball over into her basket, done with chasing.

That was when I noticed Giulia half hidden in the doorframe, her eyes so soft my own heart skipped a beat. She cradled Simona against her chest,

who still looked sleepy.

“Happy birthday, birthday boy,” she said as she walked in. “How about cake?”

Giulia lit three candles on top of a cake, which was sprinkled with what I learned was funfetti. Daniele’s eyes became wide as he took in the cake. I lifted him on one of the chairs so he could get a good look at it. “You have to blow out the candles and make a wish.”

Simona tried to lean away from Giulia to touch the candles, and her face scrunched up in frustration when she couldn’t. “Do you need help?” Giulia asked Daniele as he blew out only one candle with his first attempt.

“You’re three, a big boy. You can do it,” I told him.

He gave a small nod and blew even harder. Both candles snuffed out this time.

“Good.”

Giulia beamed as she cut the first piece of the cake. When she pulled it out, its colorful layers became visible.

“Wow,” Daniele breathed. I froze, unable to believe what I’d heard. One simple word, the first word Daniele had spoken in my presence in months.

Wow, indeed.

I had to agree with him, not just because of the rainbow funfetti cake. Giulia set down a plate in front of me and sank down on a chair with Simona on her lap, who used the moment to shove her fingers into Giulia’s cake slice.

Giulia’s laugh rang out like a bell as she snatched up Simona’s tiny hand and put it in her mouth to lick away the buttercream before wiping the remains off with a napkin. I couldn’t stop staring at her.

She noticed, her expression morphing from embarrassment to confusion. She felt her face as if she expected there to be more cake then brushed out her bangs in the nervous gesture she often expressed. I couldn’t believe I’d focused on what I perceived as wrong with Giulia—like her bangs, her quirky dresses, her age—when I first met her instead of realizing what was good. And there were so many things that even the small annoyances faded into the background. Giulia was perfect for my kids and me. Maybe because of her age because she was still youthfully optimistic, naively reckless, and daringly unconventional.

She wasn’t what I’d wanted in a wife, but hell, if she wasn’t exactly what I needed.

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TWENTY

"Is Dad a bad man?"

I almost fell off the ladder, my breath lodging in my throat. Daniele had said one or two words at the most in the two weeks since his birthday, and now he chose the morning before Christmas Eve for a loaded question like that. I waited for my initial shock to fade before I hung up another ornament on our Christmas tree. Then I slowly climbed down.

Daniele sat among the boxes with Christmas decorations, which I'd bought because I worried Gaia's old things would bring back too many hurtful memories, while Simona ripped apart the silver tinsel that she discovered in one of them.

I sat down beside Daniele, searching his face. He was spinning a red ornament on the floor, watching it with a little frown. Loulou had dashed off the moment Elia had carried the tree into the living room this morning and refused to go anywhere near it. "Who'd tell you something like that?" It couldn't be something he had decided for himself. He was too young.

"Mom." His voice was a fluttering whisper and my heart ached hearing it. He still didn't look at me, only at the ornament.

"What did she say?"

"That Dad's bad. That he hurt Andrea and that made Mom sad."

I bit my lip, trying to decide what to say. I bid my time by taking a piece of tinsel out of Simona's mouth, which led to an angry cry, but I was too distracted to react. Put off by my lack of reaction, she fell silent.

Daniele lifted his eyes, meeting my gaze head-on. He trusted me enough to ask me this question, a question that must have weighed heavily on his thin shoulders in all these months. The truth was out of the question. And if I was being honest, I wasn't sure how to answer his question truthfully. All I knew was Daniele deserved a happy childhood after everything he'd gone through. Lies were a slippery slope that eventually made you stumble. "Your uncle betrayed your dad. He ran away because he didn't want to be punished for his mistake. That hurt your mom very much. She wasn't herself after your uncle left her. That's why she didn't know what she was saying, Daniele. Your dad does everything to protect you and Simona because he loves you. He'd never hurt you or your sister."

"He didn't hurt Mom?"

"No," I whispered. It was the truth and a lie. A lie that would help our family heal. Some lies we told others to protect them or ourselves; others we told ourselves for the same reason. Today's lie was a bit of everything.

"You?"

"He doesn't hurt me either."

Simona crawled toward the tree and made a move as if to drag herself to her feet with a branch. I jumped to my feet and quickly snatched her away then carried her over to Daniele. "Will you keep watch over her?"

He nodded, and I put her in his lap. He hugged her to his body, and she seemed content for the moment. "You see," I said softly. "You want to protect Simona, and I want to protect you, and your dad wants to protect all of us."

After I was done decorating, the kids and I went into my paint room. As had been our routine over the last couple of weeks, both children got brushes, watercolors, and paper so they could entertain themselves while I finished the painting I'd started for Cassio. It was almost done. I wasn't quite happy with the spray on the waves rolling onto the beach. They needed to appear more vivid. I wanted Cassio to smell the ocean air and feel the refreshing breeze when he saw it. He had a photo of the exact same view in our bedroom, but I hoped he'd love a canvas.

Loulou sniffed at the door, but she kept running over the paper and through the paint pots, spreading colorful pawprints everywhere, so she wasn't allowed inside anymore.

Daniele dragged the brush over the sheet, creating blue lines, as if he, too, was painting the ocean.

I put down my brush and walked over to him. He didn't look up as I sank down beside him. Simona hit the floor with her own paintbrush over and over again, splattering paint everywhere. My overalls and bare feet were already covered in a myriad of colors. Daniele had returned to his quiet self after our conversation this morning, pondering what I said. I wished I could glimpse into his head.

"Your dad would love a painting of the ocean for Christmas. Why don't you give it to him?"

Daniele dipped the brush into the blue paint and continued drawing jerky lines. "Okay," was his soft reply.

"Nothing would make your dad happier than spending time with you and hearing your voice again."

Kissing Daniele's temple, I rose to my feet and returned to my canvas.

We hosted Christmas Eve dinner for the family. Luckily, Sybil cooked most of the feast. Even Ilaria and her husband came over with their kids. Mia was still heavily pregnant. I had a feeling she'd get a Christmas baby, and I could tell that she desperately wanted to give birth. Mia's and Ilaria's kids were more boisterous than Daniele, but they got along well, despite Daniele's selective muteness. When we settled at the table for dinner, one topic was definitely off-limits: Gaia. I didn't mind. Too much of her presence still lingered within these walls.

Mansueto watched Cassio and me like a hawk. He was obviously protective of his son. "When are you going to bless us with another grandchild?"

I choked on a piece of roasted asparagus.

Daniele looked between his dad and me. I wasn't sure if he understood. At least, Simona was busy squishing baby carrots in her hands.

“I’m blessing you with a grandchild any day now,” Mia said pointedly, patting her round belly.

Mansueto waved her off. “And I’m delighted about your son, but what about you, Cassio?”

Cassio set down his fork and knife slowly. A vein throbbed in his throat. I touched his leg under the table. I didn’t want a fight at Christmas dinner. “I have two small children. That’s enough.”

“You should keep your young wife in mind.”

This wasn’t about me. Maybe Mansueto worried that Andrea was indeed the father, not Cassio. Continuing the bloodline was something deeply ingrained in every mafia man, so it was astonishing that Cassio hadn’t done a paternity test the moment he’d found Gaia dead.

“I’m happy with what we have,” I said quickly.

Cassio touched my hand, gratefulness flashing in his eyes.

“Now, but what about in a few years?”

“Father,” Cassio said sharply. “That’s none of your business.”

Mia turned to me. “I hear you paint?”

I could have hugged her and gladly took her up on the topic change, even if Mansueto obviously wasn’t going to drop the topic anytime soon.

It was difficult to suppress my annoyance during dinner, so I was relieved when everyone left eventually. Father kept nagging me to take a paternity test. This was another subtle hint that I might not have an heir yet. After I’d brought Simona to bed, I found Giulia in the doorway to Daniele’s room. “Daniele wants to be tucked in by you tonight.”

I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right. It had been our ritual, one I’d cherished and missed whenever I came home too late—a thing of the past. I

moved to Giulia then peered past her toward the bed. Daniele was already in his PJs and sitting atop his comforter, stroking Loulou. Dogs didn't belong in bed. It was an opinion I stood by, but I didn't have it in me to throw her out. "You want me to read your bedtime story?"

Daniele nodded. It looked hesitant, but it was there. I met Giulia's gaze, wondering what she'd done. She gave me a hopeful smile. Warmth crowded in my chest. I'd never felt this kind of… tenderness toward a woman. I leaned down and kissed her briefly before I moved toward the bed.

Daniele's brows puckered. I sank down beside him and grabbed the picture book from the nightstand. I didn't get the chance to open it.

"You kissed Giulia."

I put down the book as I tried to pull myself together. I'd missed Daniele's voice, even if he asked difficult questions. I'd avoided physical closeness with Giulia in front of him so far, worried it might upset him. "Yes."

"Why?" He looked curious, not sad or angry. I moved a bit closer and stroked his head.

"Because I really like Giulia."

"You liked Mom too."

Looking into his brown eyes, Gaia's eyes, I couldn't do anything but lie. "I did." There had been a time when this statement would have held true. I liked her in the beginning until eventually only resentment remained.

"I miss Mom." His admittance turned my mouth dry. Of course I knew he missed her, even if she hadn't taken care of him and Simona in the last few months of her life.

"I know." I pulled him against my chest, hoping he wouldn't draw back. He didn't. He allowed me to hold him, and this small gesture alone was already the greatest Christmas gift I could imagine. I was glad he didn't ask if I missed her too. One lie was enough.

"I like Giulia too," he said quietly.

My hand on his head froze. "Good." My voice sounded strange to my own ears. That never happened. I always kept my cool no matter if we were under attack, if I killed or tortured someone, but this…

"Will she stay?"

"Yes," I said immediately. I wouldn't let anything happen to her.

"Okay." Daniele's voice sounded drowsier now. These last few months I had missed the feel of his small body becoming soft against me. I tucked

him in and hadn’t even read the first page before he was already asleep.

Loulou peeked up at me through half-closed eyes. When she wasn’t pooing everywhere or snapping, she was tolerable. I stood and returned to the bedroom, surprised to find Giulia waiting for me. I pulled her against me, needing her close. “And? How did it go?”

“Good.”

She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. There was more I wanted to say. Something I’d never said to anyone but my children. I’d formed the exact same words before, but they stuck to my tongue like glue.

“I thought we could exchange our gifts tonight. Tomorrow morning should be about the kids and Loulou opening their presents.”

I chuckled. “Don’t tell me you got the dog a present.”

Giulia pursed her lips. “Of course. She’s part of this family. And I got presents for Elia, Domenico, and Sybil as well.”

“How did your parents manage to create someone like you?”

“Christian turned out well too.”

I didn’t want to talk about him. Our interactions had been tense. He didn’t trust me, and I didn’t trust him. That wasn’t a good foundation for a work relationship. “Let me get my present. It’s in my office.”

“I’ll come with you. My present for you is downstairs as well.”

Giulia took my hand and pulled me toward her hobby room. I’d never set foot inside of it. “Close your eyes.”

I gave her a scolding look. “I’m not twelve.”

“You’re a killjoy, old man. Now close your eyes.”

I squeezed her ass cheek hard in warning, making her jump, but then I closed my eyes. She had me wrapped around her finger, and I wasn’t even trying to free myself. Her fingers tightened around my hand as she led me into the room. “Stop right here.” I did. The smell of fresh paint hung heavily in the air. “Now open your eyes.”

At first, I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to see and was confused why Giulia had taken the picture down from the wall in our bedroom. Then I realized it wasn’t the photo. It was a detailed painting of the beach in front of the house. “Did you paint it?”

“Yes,” she said, straightening her bangs and biting her lip.

I moved closer, amazed by the detail, by the liveliness of the ocean. I wasn’t an art lover and had only visited a couple of museums because business required it.

“Do you like it?”

This meant a lot to her. The painting and her art in general. I hadn’t given it much thought so far. “It’s stunning.”

A smile broke free on Giulia’s face. “Really?”

“Really.” I kissed her but before I could lose myself in her scent and taste, I stepped back. “Let me get your present.”

Excitement flashed on her face, and I half expected her to follow me but she waited impatiently. When I returned with the small parcel, she dashed toward me. “What is it?”

“It would defy the purpose of gift wrapping if I told you.”

She rolled her eyes and snatched the gift from my hands, then unwrapped it with as much restraint as Daniele. She opened the velveteen lid and her lips fell open. “Sunflower earrings?”

I’d originally bought her elegant creoles, jewelry I would have chosen—nothing Giulia would have liked. Three days ago, I changed my mind and searched the internet for sunflower earrings. Most of them had been horrid, bright yellow atrocities. Then I stumbled upon Giulia’s present on the website of a goldsmith. The sunflowers were elegant, small, and completely made from gold. They were elegant yet quirky. They were Giulia.

“They are so beautiful,” she breathed. “I thought you hated when I wear sunflowers.”

“You love them.”

“Oh, Cassio.” She took them out and fastened them to her ears. “And?”

“Beautiful.” I couldn’t wait anymore. I picked Giulia up. She giggled. “Where?”

“In bed.”

“Not the pool table?”

“No.” Tonight, I wanted to make love to her, not fuck her like two randy teenagers, even if one of us was a randy teenager. When I laid her down on the bed in front of me, I realized this would be something new for me too.

I took my time, was gentler, less urgent than usual, and after her initial confusion, Giulia mirrored my unhurried moves. Afterward, she curled up against me. “This felt different—as if it meant *something*.”

I heard the question in her voice but wasn’t sure what to say. I nodded. It had. Our first night together, I’d been this careful because Giulia needed me to be. Tonight, I needed it to figure out what was going on, to confirm what I’d never considered an option.

“Was it ever like this with a woman?”

Giulia’s voice was curious, but behind it, I could hear a flicker of… jealousy perhaps. I didn’t have to lie. “No. Not with Gaia, and before her I only had affairs.”

“And after?”

“There was no one after.”

Giulia peered up in surprise. “Really? You didn’t sleep with anyone since Gaia’s death?”

“No. I had other things on my mind.” I hesitated, wondering if I should tell her about that one slip. “But right after I found Gaia with Andrea, I slept with a woman I met when I was drunk in a bar. It was meant as a revenge fuck. To prove to myself that other women wanted me even if my own wife didn’t. I didn’t feel better afterward and never told Gaia.”

“I want only you, and when other women check you out, I don’t like it at all.”

A laugh burst out of me. “Jealous?”

“A bit.” She swung herself up and straddled my hips. “Like you, I don’t like to share.”

She didn’t have to worry. “To be honest, you’re demanding enough. I doubt I could satisfy another woman beside you.”

Her eyes widened in indignation. I flipped her over despite her pretend struggles and slammed into her, fucking her hard and fast, because there was no need to confirm what I felt anymore.

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TWENTY-ONE

Cassio

Giulia organized Simona’s first birthday party in January, baking a cake and decorating everything with balloons. My family came over around teatime.

Simona had done her first steps by now and followed Giulia like a puppy. She was too young to remember her mother. For her, there was only Giulia.

Faro and his wife and two children were invited as well. He joined me in a quiet moment. “She got Daniele to talk again.”

I nodded, following Giulia with my eyes. She righted the sunflower in Simona’s hair. My daughter’s dress also had a sunflower print. She looked adorable, so I gave up protesting. “She did. She’s good with the kids.”

“And good with you,” Faro said with a suggestive grin.

I narrowed my eyes.

“Come on, Cassio. It’s like you fell into the fountain of youth, and you’re less cranky than in the past. I’m happy for you.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Your father approached me.” From the change in Faro’s voice, I knew I wouldn’t like what he had to say.

“What did he want?”

“He asked me to talk to you about having a child with Giulia. He thinks you should be prepared for any eventualities.”

“The eventualities being that Daniele’s not my son?” I gritted out.

Faro shrugged. “It is an option, and not an unlikely one at that.”

“I don’t need another child, and I certainly don’t need you or my father to meddle in my business.”

Faro raised his arms. “I didn’t want to meddle. That’s why I told you. But your dad won’t give up anytime soon. He’s worried.”

“If he accepted that Daniele and Simona are my kids, he could stop worrying.”

“You tell him.”

I made my way over to my parents, who were talking to Mia, who was cradling her newborn son in her arms. She looked exhausted.

“Stop it, Father.”

He knew what I meant without me having to elaborate. “I’m trying to think of your future.”

I motioned toward Daniele, who was holding Simona’s hand since she was still a bit unsteady on her legs. “There is my future. End of story.”

Mother touched my forearm. “We love them, but—”

“No but.”

They exchanged a look then nodded reluctantly.

Mia gave me a proud smile.

I hoped this matter was settled once and for all. The more Father kept digging, the likelier it was that word about this would get out.

After everyone was gone, Giulia and I played a round of pool. I needed the distraction, and she’d become quite good at distracting me.

“Tomorrow, you need to take Daniele to a preschool orientation. I made an appointment a few days ago.”

Bent over the table, Giulia froze. Then she straightened. “What? Why?”

“I want him to be around other kids. This preschool only takes in kids from our circles or our business associates. Daniele will be around his future soldiers. He’ll learn to assert himself among the other boys. If he’s only around you, he might become too soft.”

Anger crossed her face. I shook my head. “It’s a fact. You can’t help it. And I only spend the evenings and weekends with him. He needs to brawl

and meet unruly boys."

"Don't interrupt me. You don't even know what I was going to say." Her tone set my teeth on edge. After the thing with my father today, I'd been eager for a fight.

"Then say what you want to say."

"You should have discussed your plans with me."

"My decision is made. Daniele needs the change."

Giulia jabbed her finger against my chest. "Even so, we're a family. I'm your wife. I deserve to be involved in a decision like that!"

"They're my kids, Giulia."

Her hurt hit me unexpectedly.

"No," she said fiercely. "They are *our* kids, Cassio. I told you before and I'll tell you again. I love all three of you."

I stared, my anger slipping away faster than quicksand. "What?"

She nodded, looking furious. "You heard me. They aren't just your kids. They are mine too. You can't call them yours when you see fit. They are always ours, yours and *mine*. Maybe not by blood, but I'd bleed for them all the same. So don't talk to me like these two kids don't mean *any*thing to me when they mean *every*thing. Just like their stubborn, idiotic father."

It was the first time Giulia had insulted me. The first time she'd gotten loud, almost screaming. Her anger didn't kindle my own like it had done with Gaia in the past, because Giulia's words were the best thing I'd ever heard. My thoughts tumbled over each other. Still, a small sliver of doubt remained as if my fucked-up mind couldn't accept that someone as good, as kind, as loving as Giulia really was mine. Fuck, I loved her, even those bangs I hated in the beginning, even those horrendous sunflower dresses, even when she disrespected me by rolling her eyes. God, especially then. I grasped her cheeks. "I love you too."

She blinked. Now it was her turn to be stunned. "What… you do?"

"You really have to ask?"

She searched my face with the same disbelief I'd felt only moments before. "Say it."

"I love you."

"Again."

I chuckled. "I love you."

"I love you too."

I kissed her, pulling her close. Eventually, she pulled back. “Are they my kids?”

“They are,” I said.

“Then allow me to decide with you.”

“I didn’t say how many days Daniele is supposed to spend in preschool. They have different options. How about you discuss them with the teachers tomorrow and then we’ll decide together?”

“Deal.” She smiled. “You really love me?”

I kissed her bangs. “Really.”

Faro and I met in my cigar lounge for our weekly check-in. Things in New York had been difficult at best, getting information on the matter even worse.

“Luca’s been particularly volatile these last couple of months. He’s been killing more men. Traitors, bikers, Bratva soldiers. People are worried if they make one wrong move, Luca will end them too.”

“People who don’t have anything to hide don’t have to worry.”

Faro grimaced. “Exactly, but we both know you didn’t tell Luca the truth about Andrea and Gaia. In his current mood, that could be your death sentence.”

“Only you and my father know. Father made sure of it.” Father had killed the cleaning team and Doctor Sal after Gaia’s death without consulting with me. He sometimes forgot I was now Underboss and didn’t need his meddling.

“What about Giulia?”

I frowned. “I trust Giulia.”

Faro shook his head. “After Gaia, you shouldn’t. What if she mentions something to her brother or God forbid her father? Felix will use his chance to either blackmail you or tell Luca so he gets bonus points.”

“Giulia won’t tell anyone.”

“They are her family. She’s a woman. They tend to overlook the shortcomings of their loved ones.”

“A fact we should be grateful for, or neither your nor my wife would put up with us.” Shortcomings didn’t even begin to cover my faults. Giulia accepted them. From the first day of our marriage, she’d taken care of Simona and Daniele selflessly, despite her young age.

“Talk to her,” Faro insisted.

A knock sounded and Giulia poked her head in. “I’m sorry for disturbing you, but Christian is here and says he needs to talk to you.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Send him in.”

Faro gave me a meaningful look.

Christian stepped in. “Faro. Cassio, can I have a word alone with you?”

“As my Consigliere, Faro will stay.”

Since the incident in December, I didn’t trust Christian anymore. We’d never been friends, but he’d been a good asset. It was unfortunate that our work relationship had suffered because of my unreasonable jealousy. I wasn’t a man who apologized, and I doubted Christian would have accepted one.

Christian nodded. He didn’t come farther into the room. Instead, he stayed close to the door. “I talked to Luca…”

Faro cut me a sharp look, but I didn’t get swept up in his panic. I still didn’t think Giulia had told her brother anything. Maybe Christian had his suspicions, but he knew better than to spread rumors that weren’t based on solid proof. I was in good standing with Luca. It would take a lot to convince him otherwise.

“I’m going to work in New York under him in the next few years until I take over in Baltimore.”

Fury raced through my veins, but I held back. “You didn’t consult with me first?”

“I’m not really one of your soldiers, Cassio. I’m the son of an Underboss. Only Luca can give me orders at the end of the day. He agreed to have me work under him.”

“Did you tell him why?”

“I said that we both have too strong of personalities to work well together.”

I narrowed my eyes, wondering if that was all he’d said. He’d been clever about contacting Luca first. That way he could make sure I wouldn’t get rid of him. Not that I would have ended him. I’d done enough damage in the past and wouldn’t risk Giulia’s love by killing her brother. “Good

luck with your new endeavor. Just remember that Luca doesn't hesitate killing those he considers a threat."

Christian's smile was tight. "I think you and him are very similar in that regard." He inclined his head then left.

Faro shook his head, frowning. "This isn't good."

"You're reading too much into it."

"The truth has a nasty habit of getting out. You should have told Luca everything from the start."

My phone rang. It was Luca. Faro looked like he considered booking us the next flight to Colombia to disappear. "Luca, what can I do for you?"

"I assume Christian talked to you?"

No bullshit talk as usual. Luca always cut to the chase. "He did. I always assumed his work under me would be temporary. Now that he's my brother-in-law, things only became more complicated."

"That's what I guessed." He paused. "Is there anything I should know?"

My pulse quickened but I didn't let it show. "In what regard?"

"About Christian. You've been dealing with him for years."

"He's effective. Tough. He knows how to handle himself. He's nothing like his father. You won't regret taking him in."

"Good. That's all for now."

I hung up. Faro raised his brows.

"It's fine."

"Let's hope it stays that way. If he ever finds out, he'll take us all down —you, your father, and me. And it won't be pretty."

I hovered close to the cigar lounge after Christian went in. After Cassio almost killed my brother, I worried about them being in a room together,

even if they'd worked together in the last couple of months.

My shoulders slumped in relief when Christian finally stepped out. "What is it? Is everything all right?"

He nodded. "I'm going to move to New York to work under Luca."

"Oh," I said, disappointed. We hadn't seen each other often, but it had been nice knowing he lived in the same city. "Because of what happened between you and Cassio?"

Christian laughed. "Fuck, of course. He accused us of having an affair. That's too much bullshit for my taste. And working under Luca will allow me to build better connections to the people who matter."

"Isn't there another way? Can't you make peace with Cassio? I don't want you to hate my husband."

Christian regarded me with obvious astonishment. "You care about him."

"I do. I know it's hard to believe, but he's good to me."

"I'm glad, but things between Cassio and me are too tense. One day, we'll have to work together again, but right now it's for the best if we don't see each other."

"I understand. When will you leave?"

"Tomorrow."

I hugged him. "Don't be a stranger and call me."

Cassio and Faro drove off shortly after, and I went into the dog park with the kids and Loulou. Surprise washed over me when Mansueto limped toward me not ten minutes after our arrival.

"Giulia, may I join you?" he asked. Elia stood immediately, making room on the bench.

"Of course," I said, suspicious of his motives. "How did you know I was here?"

"Domenico."

I nodded, slanting my older bodyguard a glance, but he was pointedly looking somewhere else.

Mansueto turned to Elia. “Give us some privacy.” Elia walked toward Simona and Daniele, who were watching Loulou play with a dachshund. Domenico had taken up watch a good distance away.

I blew into my hands to warm them, acutely aware of Mansueto’s intense scrutiny. “I’d like you to reconsider your decision not to get pregnant.”

My eyebrows skyrocketed. “It’s not only my decision. It’s Cassio’s as well. He doesn’t want more children right now. Simona and Daniele need our full attention.”

Mansueto watched a group of dogs chasing each other. “That’s because he prefers to pretend the kids are his.”

“You don’t know that they aren’t. Andrea and Gaia might have said it to hurt him.”

“So he told you everything?”

I bit my lip. “You should accept Cassio’s decision.”

“He’d change his mind if he knew the truth.”

“What truth?”

Mansueto fixed me with a sad look. “That the children aren’t his.”

“You don’t know that.”

“That’s not true. I did a paternity test without Cassio’s knowledge.”

I froze. “What?”

“Neither Simona nor Daniele are his. The test confirmed it. They are Andrea’s.”

My heart sank. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because Cassio doesn’t want to know. If I tell him… he can be very stubborn. I need your help.”

“I won’t tell him either. He doesn’t want to know, and I respect his wish.”

“Then don’t tell him now. One day he’ll find out. It’s bound to happen. At least, make sure Cassio will have an heir by then. Give him a baby. Don’t you want your own child, Giulia?”

Simona and Daniele giggled when Loulou and her dog friend had a tug of war over a long branch. “I can’t do anything.”

Mansueto touched my hand. “Cassio won’t be angry if you forget to take the pill and get pregnant by accident. You’re young and got a lot on your plate.”

I couldn’t believe what he was suggesting. “No,” I said firmly. “I won’t trick Cassio like that. Please don’t ask me for something like that ever again. Let Cassio believe Daniele and Simona’s are his, if that’s what he wants. He loves them.”

Mansueto let out a gravelly sigh. “No wonder he’s infatuated with you.”

Daniele spotted his grandpa and rushed over to us, throwing his tiny arms around him. Mansueto stroked Daniele’s head. “You’re fast, sweet child.”

Daniele smiled up at him and began telling him about Loulou and her dog friends. I stood and caught Simona, who’d stumbled twice in her haste to follow her brother and was bawling. Mansueto lifted Daniele on his lap and pointed at a Great Dane. Slowly, I returned to them.

Simona beamed at her grandfather, and he stroked her chubby cheek with a kind smile. He treated them like his grandkids.

Before he left for home, I cornered him alone. “Please promise me you won’t let anything slip to Daniele and Simona. Daniele’s getting better. He speaks. He loved his first day of preschool. I don’t want old wounds to open because blood is more important to you than anything else.”

“You should remember who you are talking to.”

“I’m not someone to show disrespect. But I’ll protect these children, even against their own grandfather if necessary.”

Mansueto let out a croaky laugh then patted my shoulder. “Cassio’s a lucky man.”

He turned around and limped back toward the black limousine with his bodyguards.

“Everything okay?” Elia inquired.

“Yeah.” I hoped I’d convinced Mansueto.

Cassio worked late and I fell asleep beside Daniele. When I woke past midnight, I followed the trickle of light downstairs and into the cigar lounge.

Cassio sat in his armchair in front of the fireplace, a tumbler with whisky in his hand, his brows drawn together as he stared into the flames.

His jacket and tie were thrown hazardously over the second chair. He was still in his vest, but the top buttons of his shirt were undone and so were his cuffs. He rubbed his stubble with his palm, looking as if he'd been set up like that for an aftershave or whisky commercial.

"You're brooding," I said as I stepped into the room.

"I'm not."

I locked the door. Cassio's eyebrows rose as I strode toward him. "Yes, you are. You keep worrying too much."

He shook his head. "There's too much to worry about."

"Talk to me about it."

I stopped in front of him. He looked weary and tired. He was working too much, worrying too much. "It's business, Giulia."

"Is it because of my brother?"

"It's part of it. Luca's stirred up a lot of shit with his brutal attacks these last few months. It's only a matter of time before the Bratva and the bikers will retaliate. But you shouldn't worry about it. You can't do anything about it."

"I can make you feel better."

He shook his head but stopped when I knelt down between his legs. He breathed out as he set the glass down on the table. Smiling up at him, I pulled down his zipper and massaged him through his boxers until he was hot and hard under my palm. Cassio's breathing had deepened and desire swam in his eyes. I freed his cock from his boxers and took only the tip into my mouth. My gaze found the glass on the side table. I reached for it and slipped the ice cube into my mouth. Cassio watched with parted lips, his chest heaving. I sucked the ice for a couple of seconds before I let it slide back into the glass, then I closed my now cold lips around Cassio's tip again.

"Oh fuck," he rasped, his head falling back. After a moment, he tilted it back down so he could watch me through half-closed eyes.

I took him deeper into my mouth, inch by inch, using my tongue to tease the sensitive tip, really taking my time, savoring his heat and taste. Cassio kept his hands, palm flat, on the armrest and let me pleasure him. For once, he let me be in control. I wanted to show him that I took care of him because I cared for him… because I loved him.

I loved the sounds he made when he was close, the low moans and sharp breaths. I loved the way his fingers flexed against the leather armrest,

how his muscular thighs quivered under the expensive fabric of his Brioni pants. But most of all, I loved the possessive gleam in his eyes a second before he let loose.

“Yes, honey,” he rasped. He tensed and came with a small shudder, his eyes falling shut. My own lust was hot and heavy between my legs, but I ignored it for now.

I swallowed and kept working him with my tongue and mouth as he twitched with the last aftershocks of his orgasm. I stroked his balls lightly and kept him in my mouth, only gently sucking. When he stilled and looked at me, he cupped my cheek. I let his cock slowly glide out of my mouth, causing him to moan low in his throat again. I kissed his thigh. “Better?”

He let out a raw chuckle. “Yeah.” He leaned forward and grasped my hips. “Now it’s my turn.”

“This was about you.”

“I know.” He hoisted me to my feet then slipped his head under my nightgown. Hooking a finger under my panties, he moved them aside, revealing my swollen flesh. He slipped his tongue between my lips and I gasped. He grasped my thigh and lifted one of my legs so my foot was on the armrest, opening me up for him. Like I had done, he took the ice cube and sucked it in his mouth before he dropped it in his hand and slid his cold tongue through my folds. The coldness thrilled me, making my back arch in pleasure. He thrust his tongue into me, and I gripped his head for better leverage so I could move my hips and drive it even deeper into me. He pulled back and then his fingers touched the ice cube to my pussy. I cried out at the sensation. Cassio rubbed the cube over my folds slowly until I was coated with the cold liquid, and then he leaned forward again and gently sucked the moisture from my sensitive skin. I shook from the force of pleasure, but I held back. Cassio pushed two fingers into me, ice-cold from holding onto the cube.

I rocked my hips, needing more, desperate for more. One of his fingers found my ass and pushed in. “Oh God,” I gasped. Two fingers in my pussy, the tip of one in my ass and Cassio’s mouth on my clit, I fell apart with a violent shudder. He pressed me closer to his face and as he did, he slid deeper into my back entrance. The force of my orgasm dulled the pain. I sank down on his lap, sated and exhausted.

“What was that?” I finally managed.

“I wanted to do more than just slap your pretty ass.”

I huffed.

“Did you like it?”

“I’m undecided, but I’m leaning toward no.”

He laughed deep in his throat. “Maybe I can convince you.”

“Maybe. But you’ll have to be very convincing with your tongue before I’ll give this another try.”

He stroked my hipbone and back, and I smiled to myself. I’d been worried all day because of the conversation with Mansueto. Now I felt lighter. Nothing had changed. I’d keep the truth from Cassio, for himself and for the kids.

“I think Simona is starting to speak.”

“What did she say?” Cassio sounded tired, his voice even lower than usual.

“Dada. It sounds a bit like Dad.”

Cassio squeezed my arm but didn’t say anything.

“I’ve been wondering what she’s supposed to call me. I know Daniele calls me Giulia, but…” I swallowed, worried about voicing my idea “…but I thought maybe Simona wants to call me mom. She doesn’t remember Gaia, and it would be sad if she never had someone she could call Mom. She—”

Cassio finally interrupted my rambling by pulling back and kissing me. “You’re right. You are her mom now, so that’s what she should call you. She’ll probably get confused in the beginning because Daniele calls you Giulia.”

“Yeah, but that’s okay. I’ll move at their pace. I’m just happy they both accept me.”

“It’s because you accepted them from the very first day. You never resented them or me for the weight of your responsibilities.”

“In the beginning, it felt like a responsibility. Like something I needed to master, but it isn’t like that anymore. This family is part of my life now.”

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TWENTY-TWO

We spent our first summer vacation at the beach house. It was early June and the sun was shining brightly. The weather forecast had predicted a few days without rain. Cassio had taken the week off from work, which didn't mean he wouldn't have to return in case of an emergency, but I was still ecstatic about the chance to have a family vacation on the beach.

I dressed Simona in a cute two-piece with ruffles and sunflowers, cute sunglasses, and a straw hat. My bikini looked very similar, minus the excessive frills, but we still managed a cute twin look. Daniele wore his favorite Superman swim trunks.

Cassio was eye-candy in his board shorts. He carried Daniele into the water while Simona and I dipped only our toes into the Atlantic. I preferred lukewarm water, so I didn't understand how Cassio and Daniele could enjoy a dip in the cold. Simona shared my opinion and squealed every time the waves touched her tiny toes. Her eyes brimmed over with joy as she raised her arms. "Arm, Mom."

Every time she called me "Mom," my heart skipped a beat. She occasionally called me "Giula" when she tried to imitate Daniele, but she had trouble pronouncing my name. Daniele had been confused the first few times she'd called me mom, but after I'd explained to him that I wasn't trying to take his mom's place and that it only showed how much I loved and cared for them, he'd come to terms with it.

Hugging Simona to my chest, I watched Cassio carry Daniele on his shoulders. Everybody who saw them knew they were father and son, not because of physical similarities but because of how they acted around each other. It was beautiful. Loulou barked wildly beside me, enraged that Cassio and Daniele were out of her reach, but she wasn't very fond of water.

"Dad!" Simona screamed, stretching out her arms. Cassio came out of the water and set Daniele down on the beach. Loulou inspected him at once as if she worried the ocean could have harmed him. I handed Simona to Cassio, and before he went back into the water, he kissed me.

Daniele ran along the water's edge, Loulou still barking close behind him. Her fur had grown in again, and she was the cutest curly fluff ball.

"Not so fast!" I called when Daniele and Loulou became too wild, and then Daniele stumbled and fell down hard. I rushed over to him. Loulou was already licking his face. I knelt beside him. He was cradling his knee, crying. He'd landed on a stone and was bleeding from a cut below his knee. "It's all right. We'll fix you."

Cassio's shadow fell over us. He handed Simona over to me and carried Daniele into the house. He managed to calm down in his dad's arms.

The wound didn't need stitches, thankfully. Cassio cleaned it and patched it up with a Band-Aid, all the while talking in a low, soothing voice to Daniele.

Daniele didn't shed another tear. He tried to be a big boy when he was around his dad. Cassio patted his head.

"Do you want a popsicle?" I asked.

He bit his lip, looking down at the sofa, shuffling his legs.

"Daniele?" I got down on my haunches in front of him, trying to figure out what was wrong. He wrapped his arms around my neck, surprising me. "Hey, you okay?"

I hugged Daniele tightly to my chest, not sure why he needed my closeness but more than willing to give it to him. "Mom," he whispered. I froze. Cassio tensed, his eyes tumultuous as he watched. Was Daniele thinking of Gaia? Missing her? I pulled back slowly.

Daniele looked down at my chin. "Can I call you mom?"

I choked and tears sprang into my eyes at his unexpected request.

Cassio's face became still.

I kissed Daniele's cheek then crushed him to me once more. "Yes. Nothing would make me happier. I love you."

He began to sniffle, and I couldn’t hold back either. Cassio averted his eyes, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. After a moment, he came over to us and knelt beside us, hugging us both. I pressed my face into his chest, feeling his heartbeat thundering in his ribcage. Cassio kissed the top of my head then Daniele’s.

Daniele called me mom every chance he got that day, shyly at first, but later with adorable giddiness.

In the evening, Cassio and I sat on the swing in front of the house, watching the sunset. We hadn’t talked about today’s events yet. With Daniele and Simona around, there hadn’t been time.

“I didn’t expect it,” I said. Cassio knew what I was referring to without me stating it outright. His arm around my shoulders tightened, holding me even closer to his side.

“Me neither. He’s old enough to remember his mother, but I suppose even the memory will fade with time. He was too young to form a strong bond with her. I guess it’s a blessing after all.”

“I suppose so.” It seemed horribly cruel to be glad for Gaia’s early death, but for Simona and Daniele, it was probably easier that way. Had they both been older at the time of her suicide, they would have struggled even more. “Eventually, Daniele and Simona will ask questions about Gaia. It’s natural to want to know more about your birth mother.”

Cassio breathed out. “Until they do, I won’t talk about her. Everything I’ll tell them will be a lie anyway.”

“Not everything.”

“When we married, I thought I was doing damage control.”

My eyebrows climbed my forehead. Cassio chuckled seeing it. “I know. Not very romantic. But you were meant to make my life easier.”

“You expected to get a nanny with some sexy times thrown in the mix.”

“I can’t deny it. I didn’t consider the option that we would become partners, that I would enjoy your presence outside of the bedroom, and even that seemed unlikely after I first met you.”

“You know how to turn this romantic sunset, even more romantic,” I teased.

“Romantic isn’t my strong suit.”

“You don’t say?”

Cassio turned to me and cupped my cheek. “You surprised me and keep surprising me.”

“That’s good… right?”

“More than good.”

“Do you think you’ll ever fully trust me? Ever not expect I’ll cheat on you?”

“I trust you.” At my doubtful expression, he added, “I do, but I’m not sure if the nagging doubt at the back of my head will ever fully leave. Catching Gaia like that...” He shook his head then peered out toward the ocean. “I know most people are capable of doing very bad things. I see it every day. It’s difficult not to always expect the worst.”

I understood him. I couldn’t imagine how it must have felt to catch your partner cheating on you, especially with family. “I won’t cheat. I’ll work for your trust every day no matter how long it takes for your nagging voice to shut up. I love you.”

Cassio bent down, his lips touching mine. “If anyone can *shut up* my nagging voice, then it’s you. You’ve breathed new life into me.”

“You mean your newfound virility?” I teased, grinning.

Cassio didn’t smile. He stroked my hair, his eyes following his fingers as they slid down. “Into everything. I was dead inside, going through the motions of every day, living for work, for building a future for my kids. While doing that I forgot about the present, about living. You showed me how important it is to live in the moment, to experience my children’s life and not just plan for their future.” He kissed me. Then his smile became darker. “But my newfound virility is definitely another perk of your presence in my life.”

His hand slipped under my shirt. I looked around.

“Nobody can see us here.”

“I know,” I said. Then I stood and took a step back. “But I was thinking of trying out the beach…”

Cassio got up. “You’ll have sand everywhere.”

I took another step back and pulled my shirt over my head. “Maybe I’ll like the additional friction, old man.”

Cassio’s smile turned wolfish. “I think I need to dunk you in the ocean first to punish you for your insolence.”

I backed away, down the stairs, and Cassio stalked me like a hunter after his prey. “Run, little girl, run.”

“I’m not—” He lunged for me but with a choked screech, I jumped back, whirled around, and dashed away. My feet sunk into the soft sand and

the cool evening breeze whipped at my hair. I threw a glance over my shoulder, finding Cassio taking off his shoes, shirt, and pants. Rolling my eyes, I dropped my bra and called, “You’ll never catch up with me, old man!”

He was surprisingly fast. Hell, he was faster than any man of his height and muscle mass had any business of being. All the damn workouts were paying off, it seemed.

Giggling, I popped open the button of my shorts. Unfortunately, I couldn’t stop because Cassio was hot on my heels, and so I almost stumbled in my attempt to shove off my shorts while running. Only in my panties, I sped up even more, trying to run up the dunes and away from the ocean.

“Gotcha,” Cassio growled a moment before his arms wrapped around my middle and he lifted me off the ground. He pressed a hot kiss against my neck then bit down, causing me to gasp. Despite my struggling, he carried me over to the ocean’s edge. “This will be very cold. Fortunately, I know the perfect way to get you warm again.”

“Cassio, don’t you dare!” I warned but he stepped into the waves. The cold spray hit my calves. “Cassio!”

He threw me into the water. Shock at the freezing cold of the Atlantic zapped through my body. I burst through the water surface with a gasp, drawing in a sharp breath as my body struggled to get used to the cold.

Cassio looked as if he was taking a dip in the Caribbean and not the Atlantic. He didn’t even have goose bumps!

I glared at him, but at the same time couldn’t help but grin. Maybe I had surprised him, but he surprised me too. When I’d first seen him in the foyer of my parents’ home, looking so terribly poised and in control, I’d wondered how we’d ever work. We were still different in many aspects of our personalities, but we both made small adjustments for the other. Marriage was giving and taking, and despite Cassio’s need to control everything, he, too had given to make this work.

“How about getting you warm now?” He pressed close to me, pulling me against his wonderfully warm body. His mouth claimed my throat once more.

“No sex in the ocean. I’ll freeze off important assets if we stay in the water any longer.”

Cassio laughed deeply against my skin. “What kind of assets?” His mouth traveled south then closed around my nipple.

I clutched his head, nodding. “That one for example.” I searched the row of houses lined up on the dunes. Light shone in some of them, and I wondered if they’d be able to see us if they looked out toward the ocean.

I didn’t care.

“I’ll keep your assets warm, don’t worry,” he murmured against my skin, and I decided freezing to death might be worth it.

After a quickie in the ocean, I managed to convince Cassio of another round on the beach, which I regretted afterward… just like he’d predicted. A thick coating of sand covered every inch of my body, and more than one grain of sand had found its way in crevices I preferred sand-free. After a long shower, I still felt sore as we settled on the swing once more. Cassio’s I-told-you so face was additional punishment.

Someone knocked at the window. Simona pressed her nose against the glass and hammered her little fists against it. Cassio opened the door and picked her up before he settled with her on his lap beside me. Simona snuggled against him and gave me a tired smile. I ruffled her dark blond locks and curled my legs under my body. Cassio kept the swing in motion with his longer legs.

Not long after, the terrace door opened again, and Daniele stepped out onto the porch barefoot. Rubbing his eyes, he stumbled toward us. I hoisted him onto the swing between us, and he rested his little head against my chest.

I’d never considered myself ready to become a mom. I’d felt like a child myself most days before Dad told me about my engagement to Cassio. It was true that you rose to the tasks presented to you if you only faced them head-on. I’d probably mess up often raising these kids. I’d have to learn with them.

Cassio leaned his head back, looking at peace and content. I wanted to be his safe haven. His work was full of blood, conflict, and death. I didn’t want that at home. He caught me staring and gave me a tired smile.

I’d take care of Simona and Daniele, I’d protect them from everything, even the truth. I swore I’d never lie to Cassio, but the truth his father told me would have to be the one exception.

Lies had a way of catching up with you eventually. I hoped this was one of the cases where they didn’t.

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TWENTY-THREE

Nine years after the wedding

Cassio came home in the afternoon. He'd reserved a table in our favorite restaurant for our ninth anniversary, a small place that served rustic French food. Mia had agreed to watch Simona and Daniele. Though it was more of a sleepover, considering that they were nine and almost twelve. They didn't need to be watched 24/7 anymore, even if they were up to no good more often than not.

We'd just finished a delicious liver paté with warm Brioche and two glasses of Viognier, my favorite white wine, when I gathered my courage. "Do you still not want any more children?" I meant to ask it in a calm, low voice, but instead I'd blurted it out.

Cassio lowered his glass slowly, brows pulling tight. "Are you…?"

I gave him a look then raised my almost empty wine glass. "Really? You think I'd drink two glasses of wine if I were pregnant?"

He chuckled. "I didn't think about it."

"Men," I muttered, but I couldn't help but smile. "So, what do you say?"

I was oddly nervous about this. Cassio and I talked about almost everything, except for the kind of business dealings he deemed too brutal for me—and the secret about Simona and Daniele I still carried in the deepest corner of my heart.

Cassio put his hand on mine. “Do you want another child?”

Another child. Not a child, not your own child. We’d come such a long way, and now there was absolutely no doubt that Simona and Daniele were my children too.

“I don’t feel like our family is complete yet. I want to have a baby to cuddle again.”

“They also cry, vomit, and poop, and once they don’t do that anymore, they throw the worst tantrums. You really want that?”

I grinned. “Yes.”

Cassio shook his head as if I was unreasonable, but from the gentle look in his eyes, I knew I had him. “So?”

“If you want another baby, you’ll get it.”

“But what about you? I don’t want you to give me a baby only to do me a favor.”

Cassio bent over the table. “Trust me, giving you a baby isn’t a chore for me.” I slapped his forearm lightly, and he continued in an even lower voice. “I’d love to have a baby with you.”

“We can start today,” I whispered and ran my high heel up his trouser leg, smiling suggestively. In his form-fitting suit, he looked irresistible.

One corner of his mouth rose. “Are you sure you want to miss the Canard à l’orange and the Crepe Suzette?” Hearing Cassio speak French, even if it was only to praise a duck in orange sauce and pancakes was almost too much for what little control I had left.

I pressed my heel against his crotch, causing him to form a low hiss in his throat. “Okay, food first, sex later.”

He shook his head but couldn’t say anything because the waiter was heading our way with our main course.

We spent Christmas at our beach house like we’d done the two previous years. Despite the cold, we loved to take strolls along the beach. For Cassio, it was a way to get away from the weight of his responsibilities for a couple of days. When he was home, someone always wanted something from him.

That was the problem if you were Underboss. Dad had always delegated most of the work. Cassio preferred to have control.

Simona and Daniele decorated the Christmas tree while I prepared Christmas dinner for the family. Loulou hovered beside me, hoping a slice of bacon would drop to the floor. It had become tradition that Cassio's sisters and their families, as well as his parents, came over to us to celebrate. My parents didn't want to drive long distances in winter, so we always visited them in Baltimore after Christmas.

I had a special Christmas present for Cassio that I would give him once we were alone. A gift box filled with a cute onesie with the words "Hello, Dad," earplugs, Advil, and rug cleaner as a joke for that one time Simona ripped away her diaper and pooed on our living room rug after eating red beet. It was a memorable moment that the rug didn't survive. Apparently beet was harder to get out of fabric than blood.

I couldn't wait for his reaction.

When I didn't drink wine during dinner, Mia gave me a knowing look, and Cassio, too, seemed to catch on quickly. What worried me more was Mansueto's eager expression. He'd kept his promise and not mentioned the paternity test again, but his silence didn't mean it wasn't still in his mind. His health had deteriorated rapidly in the last few months. He needed a wheelchair and had lost plenty of weight. Getting an heir, one who was related to him in blood, might be one of the last things he wanted to accomplish in his life.

Even before Giulia gave me my Christmas present, I knew she was pregnant and not only because she wasn't drinking wine. She'd acted differently in the last couple of weeks. Subtle changes. She'd occasionally

touch her breasts as if they ached. She also hadn't felt well in the morning. I never asked because I wanted to give her time to come to terms with it.

Of course, everyone else picked up on it during dinner as well. Giulia always drank a glass of white wine with her food.

Before Father and Mother left, he took me aside. I knew what was coming. "You should consider doing a paternity test now. Your unborn child deserves it."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I whispered harshly. Daniele and Simona were saying goodbye to their cousins and too far away to hear anything.

"If it's a boy, he might be your true heir."

"This discussion is over."

"I'm old. I don't know how long I still have—"

"Which is why you shouldn't destroy our relationship now."

Father nodded then motioned for Mother to roll him out of the house.

Giulia watched me worriedly. I gave her a tight smile. She didn't need to know about this.

When I opened Giulia's box later in our bedroom, I felt a little stunned, even though I'd known what it would reveal. I was forty. After Gaia's death, I had been sure I'd never become a father again, and now here I was.

"I'm pregnant," she whispered when I didn't say anything for a few seconds.

I wrapped her in a gentle embrace, kissing her sweet mouth. "That was quick." Pride rang in my voice.

Giulia rolled her eyes. "We practiced so hard over the years, your swimmers are practically ready for Olympic gold."

Even after all these years, Giulia's quick wit still often caught me off guard. "Sometimes I don't know what to do with you."

She pursed her lips. "Kiss me?"

I did, then I pulled back. "Should we tell Simona and Daniele tomorrow?"

Giulia hesitated.

"I'm sure they'll be happy." They had accepted Giulia as their mother. Daniele hardly ever mentioned Gaia, and Simona didn't remember anything of her.

Worry flickered across Giulia's face, and I realized she hadn't been worried about our kids not accepting a baby—until my inconsiderate words.

“That wasn’t why you hesitated.”

“No, I just thought we should wait a few more weeks. I don’t want something to happen.” She searched my eyes. “They will be happy, right?”

“Of course. Then they have someone else to torture.” Those two were like cats and dogs sometimes, especially now that they grew older and Daniele was trying to appear cool.

We waited six more weeks before we announced the pregnancy to them at the dining table one evening.

For a moment, both of them only watched with wide eyes. Then they began to cheer. They didn’t know what a baby meant: babysitting and diaper changing duties.

Giulia laughed in relief.

Simona jumped up from her chair and rushed over to Giulia, throwing her arms around her.

“Careful,” I said. “Your mom has a baby in her belly.”

Simona nodded wide-eyed and stared at Giulia’s still flat stomach. “Can it hear me?”

“Yes.”

She leaned down. “Please be a little sister. Boys are annoying.”

“Hey! You’re annoying.” Daniele had talked with his mouth full and a few noodles fell out when he spoke.

Simona wrinkled her nose. “You stink.”

Daniele swallowed and let out a burp. “That stinks.”

“Ewww!”

“Enough,” I said firmly. “We’re having dinner.”

Daniele nodded, but he kept his eyes on Simona.

Simona stroked Giulia’s belly as if it was a magic lamp and would grant her a wish before she returned to her place. Daniele stuck his food-covered tongue out at her. She hit him. I gave Giulia a look. *You really want another one of these?*

“I can’t wait for another one,” she said.

I was in my eighth month when Mansueto had another heart attack. The doctors weren't sure if he'd ever leave the hospital again. When he asked me to visit him alone, dread filled me.

He was pale and thin in the hospital bed. His eyes were even duller than usual, and he could barely lift his head in greeting when I walked in.

"How are you?" I asked gently as I sank down in the chair beside the bed.

"I don't have long."

I touched his wrinkly hand. "You don't know that."

He smiled weakly. "I'm going to die, Giulia, and there's only one thing I need to do before I leave this earth."

"And what is that?"

"I want my blood to live on, to rule." He nodded at my belly. "You carry the true heir to the name Moretti in your womb. Daniele shouldn't be allowed to become Underboss. It's just not right."

I leaned back and pulled my hand away. That was exactly why I wished we hadn't told Mansueto the gender of the baby. If it had been a girl, he wouldn't have been this obsessed.

"Do a dying man the favor of telling Cassio the truth about those kids. He needs to know."

I shook my head. "I won't tell him and you shouldn't either. Why would you even ask me to do it?"

He smiled tiredly. "I'm an old man. I don't have long to live. Cassio would never forgive me if I told him. I can't leave this world with him hating me. But if you tell him…"

"You can't be serious."

"He loves you, Giulia. He'd forgive you. How could he not?"

“Even if I told him, it wouldn’t change a thing. He loves Daniele and Simona. He’d still want Daniele to become Underboss.”

“If that were true, then why did he never want to know the truth? It’s ingrained in every man, the need to create a legacy, and his legacy grows in your belly. The only legacy Daniele carries is one of betrayal and incest.”

My eyes grew wide. Fierce protectiveness boiled up inside me. I couldn’t believe he had the audacity to insult my child in front of me. “How can you say that?”

Mansueto struggled into a sitting position. “Because it’s true. Don’t you want your son to become Underboss? Don’t you want him to have the position he deserves?”

I couldn’t speak. I pressed a palm to my stomach, stunned. Mansueto misunderstood the gesture.

“Every mother wants what’s best for her own child, and that baby in your womb is Cassio’s and yours. If you ask Cassio, he’ll disinherit Daniele and make your son the true heir.”

I shook my head slowly. “He’d never do it.”

“He would. For you. He’d do anything for you. Even that. He loves you more than anything else.”

“The person he loves would never ask him to disinherit his child.”

Mansueto’s eyes became imploring. “Then don’t ask him. You could let the truth slip by accident. If people find out about Daniele’s father, they’d never accept him as Underboss in the Famiglia. Incest is something shameful and disgusting.”

“Daniele and Simona can’t help who their parents are.”

“Giulia—”

“No,” I said firmly. “You know I respect you, Mansueto, but that you even consider suggesting something like that…” I took a deep breath. “I won’t do it. I’ll pretend you never even asked me.” I moved closer to him and took his wrinkly pale hand again. “Promise me not to tell it to anyone. Promise.”

Mansueto sighed, his eyes tightening with regret.

My pulse sped up. “Who? Who have you told?”

“Your father.”

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TWENTY-FOUR

How could he have told my father? He might as well have announced it on the news!

I turned around and hurried out of the hospital room, almost colliding with Mia on my way out. She steadied me with a firm grip on my shoulder. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

I forced a smile. “I forgot about an appointment. I’m sorry. I need to leave.”

“Okay.” Hesitation and worry reflected on her face.

Elia, who’d waited in the corridor for me, fell into step beside me, but I motioned for him to give me some privacy as I called Dad.

He picked up after the second ring, his voice cheerful. Of course, he was ecstatic. “Giulia, how’s my grandson?”

“Don’t tell anyone, Dad. Don’t. Swear it.”

Silence on the other end. “What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Daniele and Simona. Don’t tell anyone what Mansueto told you.”

“Giulia,” Dad began as if he was still talking to my naïve seven-year-old self.

“Dad, I mean it. I don’t want the news to get out. You are the only one who could spread it.” My steps became faster, but the additional weight of my belly made me slow, and I had to wait for the elevator because taking the staircase was out of the question.

“You can’t expect me to sit on information that can lead to my grandson, my own flesh and blood, to becoming Underboss. You should want that too. Do you want your son to be only a Captain and serve under the result of incestuous adultery?”

I gritted my teeth against the insult. Elia watched me worriedly as we took the elevator down to the underground garage. “I’m coming to Baltimore. Don’t talk to anyone. I’ll be there in two hours. Swear it.”

Dad sighed. “I swear it. I’m going to tell your mother to have the cooks prepare a nice dinner for us.”

I hung up. “We need to drive to Baltimore.”

Elia frowned. “To your parents’ home?”

“Yes. We have to leave right away.”

Elia led me toward the car and opened the door for me.

“You need to tell Cassio first.”

I sank down on the passenger seat as Elia slipped behind the steering wheel. I dialed Cassio’s number but got the busy signal. Luca was in town to talk to Cassio and Mansueto. Everyone knew that Mansueto didn’t have long. Maybe Cassio was in a conference call with other Underbosses and his Capo. “We can’t wait until I can reach him. It’s urgent.”

Elia gave a terse nod and pulled out of the parking garage. Traffic was horrendous, and my worry increased with every passing second. Eventually, Cassio called me back.

“Are you all right?” The worry in his voice warmed my insides.

“I’m fine. The baby’s fine too. Don’t worry. I’m on my way to my parents.”

“What’s the matter?”

I hated lying to Cassio, but I didn’t know what else to do. “My mother broke down today. I just want to make sure she’s fine, and they’ve been asking me to visit for a while.”

“Isn’t it too strenuous in your state?”

I huffed. “I’m pregnant, not sick.”

“Be careful. Elia is with you, I assume?”

“Of course. And my parents have their own bodyguards, not to mention Christian will be there as well.”

“That’s good. Unlike your father, he’s a capable man.”

Usually I defended my father, but today I couldn’t find the words. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning. I’ll have dinner with them and spend the

night.”

“Okay,” Cassio said. In the background, I could hear male voices. “I love you,” he said quietly so no one but me could hear.

“And I love you.”

I hung up, more resolved than before. Elia regarded me closely. “Is there anything I should know?”

“No.” I softened the word with a smile. It was bad enough that Mansueto had told my father. Knowing him, he’d probably already passed the news on to Mom and Christian. It was only a matter of time before it spread like wildfire. I didn’t even want to imagine what it would do to Daniele and Simona.

I fell asleep after a while. Elia woke me when we pulled up in front of my old home. Elia got out and held the door open for me.

Mom and Dad waited on the porch, both of them beaming like a kid on Christmas morning. I wished it wasn’t because of something that could destroy the people I loved most in the world.

I headed toward them and hugged them briefly. Christian waited behind them for his turn. “You’re growing bigger every day.”

“That’s not something you should tell a woman,” I told Christian. “Are you alone?”

“The flu has taken hold of our house. I’m the last man standing.”

I smiled but it fell when I met Dad’s gaze.

“You must be hungry,” Mom said eagerly, motioning for me to follow her into the dining room. I gave Elia a small nod so he knew it was okay to leave. He went into our guard room.

We all settled at the table. Once the maid had served dinner and disappeared, I bridged the subject. “I assume Dad told you already?”

Christian nodded grimly. His tight expression made it clear he disapproved of it.

Mom pursed her lips. “You should be ecstatic, Giulia. This is your chance.”

My eyebrows shot up. How was that my chance? I wasn’t going to become Underboss. “I don’t want the news to get out.”

“You should want what’s best for your child,” Dad said in a reprimanding voice.

I exploded. “Is that so? Was it for my best when you married me off to a man you described as the cruelest Underboss in the Famiglia, a man almost

twice my age? Was that for my best or yours, Dad?”

Dad’s face became stone. He glared down at his plate. I almost felt guilty because despite all his faults, I loved him. He’d been a better father than many other men in our world.

“How can you speak in that tone to your father? Show some respect,” Mom hissed.

I took a bite of the beef tenderloin, trying to stay calm. Keeping a level head had become more difficult since pregnancy hormones were in play. “I respect you, but your ambition is going to ruin everything. I don’t care if this baby becomes Underboss. I want only the best for him, but becoming a leader in our world isn’t part of it.”

“You were always a dreamer, Giulia. It’s what I love about you,” Dad said, breaking through my rising anger until his next words. “But as a man, I can’t afford irrational daydreams. I know the realities of our life. And the truth is that all that matters is a position of power. I won’t have the son of a cheating whore as an Underboss. Our grandson will rule over Philadelphia and no one else.”

“Dad,” Christian began with a frown.

“No, I won’t discuss the matter further. Once you’re Underboss next year, you can make the decisions, but now it’s still my word ruling in this home and city. I don’t care if I have to tell the truth to every member of the Famiglia myself as long as it means our blood will rule in Philadelphia.”

I dropped my fork and stood. “If that’s the case, today is the last time you’ll see me.”

Christian touched my arm. “Stay. You shouldn’t drive back again so soon in your state.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. I won’t stay in this house for another second.”

Dad rose from his chair. “I’m doing this for our family. You’ll realize it once your son is born, and then you’ll thank me.”

I smiled sadly, tears stinging in my eyes. “You’re wrong, but I know you and Mom will never understand. You can’t.”

“You should be grateful,” Mom whispered as if I’d personally broken her heart. I was sick of this game.

“I’m grateful I didn’t inherit your ambition. I won’t ever turn my children into pawns in this horrendous game for power. Not Daniele, not Simona, not Gabriel.” I touched my belly. “Because they all are my

children, and I'll fight everyone like a warrior to protect them of the horrors of this world, even if they come in the shape of my own parents."

"How dare you after everything we've done?" Mom whispered harshly.

"After everything you've done?" I shouted. My stomach constricted with a sharp pain, but I ignored it. "You married me off to Cassio so he'd guarantee Dad's position. You married your own niece off to the monsters from Las Vegas for the same reason, and you want my gratefulness?"

I turned, clutching my belly, my heart pounding in my chest. Elia waited in the lobby, his hand on his gun, his eyes narrowed.

"You better take your hand off your gun or you won't live to see tomorrow," Christian growled.

Elia ignored him and stepped up to me, cupping my elbow. "Are you all right, Giulia?"

I gave a terse nod. "Take me home. I'm done here."

Elia led me outside, grabbing my coat on the way. Christian followed. I sagged down on the passenger seat. Before I closed the door, my brother leaned in. "Text me when you're home so I know you're okay."

I gave him a shaky smile. "I wish you already were Underboss."

"Even then I wouldn't be able to stop Dad from spreading the news. You know our parents. This is their chance."

"I know."

"I'll try talking them out of it anyway."

Cassio and Christian had come to a tentative understanding over the years. They still weren't friends but they respected each other. Christian would never spread the news, even if it could potentially better his position.

"Don't waste your time," I said before I closed the door. There was only one person who could guarantee my parents' silence at this point. The man my father feared like the devil, and not just because he was his Capo.

"Is Luca still in Philly?"

Elia frowned. "I think so. The meeting is supposed to go late. He won't return to New York until tomorrow morning."

"Find out where he is and take me to him."

Elia cut his gaze to me. "You can't just go to the Capo."

"Said Capo is also my cousin. He can make time for family, right?"

"What is going on, Giulia? You can trust me, or Cassio wouldn't have chosen me as your bodyguard."

“I trust you.” I looked out of the window. Elia was a good man, and an even better soldier and bodyguard.

“But you won’t tell me what this is about?”

I leaned my forehead against the glass. “I can’t.” Elia was Cassio’s soldier first. He was loyal to him. He’d tell Cassio the truth the moment he found out.

“Because Cassio isn’t supposed to know.” A hint of suspicion rang in his voice.

“Take me to Luca, Elia. That’s all you need to know.”

Elia’s mouth tightened, but he picked up his phone and called someone to ask where the Capo was. As it turned out, Luca was back in his hotel when we finally returned to Philadelphia.

“Do you have Luca’s number?” I asked as we stepped into the luxurious lobby of the Ritz Carlton.

“No. Not every soldier gets the Capo’s number, Giulia. He rules over thousands of men. I haven’t even talked to him so far.”

I walked up to the reception and smiled at the receptionist. Finding out Luca’s room number proofed tricky. The receptionist refused to give it to me. “Then call his room and tell him his cousin Giulia wants to talk to him.”

The woman did just that, nodding as she spoke into the phone. “All right, Mr. Vitiello.” She hung up and smiled politely at me. “The presidential suite on the thirtieth floor.”

I headed toward the elevators. Elia shook his head as he stalked after me. “He probably thinks it’s a trap and awaits with blazing guns. Luca is the most distrustful man I know, and for good reason.”

“Well, he won’t shoot a pregnant woman. And he knows me, so calm down.”

Elia’s tenseness stirred my own anxiety. The moment we arrived on the thirtieth floor, I touched Elia’s chest. “You stay here. I need to talk to Luca alone.”

Elia’s expression hardened. “I can’t let you out of sight.”

“Are you going to tell Luca that you don’t trust him with me? I’d like to see that.”

Elia swallowed. “I’m staying right outside the door.”

I rolled my eyes. “So you can react if you hear me screaming? Are you going to kill your Capo to defend me? Don’t be ridiculous. He’d kill you

before you could blink.”

Elia didn’t contradict me. I knocked at the door. Nothing happened for a while then finally the door opened, and Luca stood in the gap. He held a gun in his right hand and his expression was the usual harsh mask.

I smiled, trying to mask my nerves. “Good evening, Luca. I’m sorry to disturb you. Can I have a word with you?”

Luca glanced behind me at Elia and the look in his eyes sent a chill down my back. “I didn’t expect you, Giulia.” His wary gaze settled on me. We were cousins, but that didn’t mean we were close or that Luca trusted me the slightest bit. He didn’t trust anyone. After a moment, he nodded and opened the door for me. “Come in.”

I walked past him. “Elia will wait outside. What we have to discuss is private.”

Luca raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment as he closed the door. According to the rules in our world, this was inappropriate. A married woman wasn’t supposed to be alone with another man, but I’d never bothered with these rules and wasn’t going to start now. Luca motioned me toward the seating area of his suite. I sank down on the white sofa. Luca took a seat in an armchair across from me. He returned his gun to the holster around his chest, but the suspicion remained on his face. “Does Cassio know you’re here?”

I pursed my lips. “No, and I’d appreciate it if it would stay that way.” Luca narrowed his eyes. As my husband, Cassio had a right to know if I met with someone, especially a man, *especially* the Capo.

“What is it you need to discuss with me that you don’t want your husband to find out?”

He looked down at my belly and my eyes grew wide. “It’s not about this baby,” I said quickly. “It’s about Daniele and Simona.”

I hesitated. Cassio respected Luca. He called him the best Capo the Famiglia had ever had, but trust each other? No. Men like them couldn’t afford to trust many. But Luca was the only one who could silence my parents. I had to risk telling him because otherwise the truth would get out without a doubt.

“What about them?”

“They aren’t Cassio’s.”

Surprise crossed Luca’s face. Then his expression became even harsher. “How would you know?”

“Because Mansueto told me. He did a paternal test after the thing with Andrea and Gaia.”

The moment the words left my mouth, I realized my mistake. Luca didn’t know. Every muscle in his body became taught as he leaned forward. “The thing with Gaia and Andrea?”

I blinked. Cassio had never told Luca what happened? I thought Luca knew about Gaia’s death and why she’d killed herself.

“Giulia.” The word cut through me like a blade.

I looked away. It was too late to lie. But what would the truth mean for Cassio? I swallowed. “Gaia had an affair with her half-brother, and Cassio found out. Mansueto suspected Andrea was the father and the test confirmed his suspicions.”

“And now you’re here because you want your son to become Cassio’s rightful heir instead of Daniele.”

“No,” I whispered, horrified. “I don’t want Cassio to find out. I don’t want anyone to find out, which is why I’m here. I’m asking you to force my parents into silence. They know and they’re eager to spread the news.”

Luca regarded me, and some of the brutality slipped away. “You don’t want your son to become Underboss.”

“Daniele is my son too.”

Luca stared off to the side for a couple of heartbeats. “Keeping this kind of news a secret is difficult.”

“Nobody knows except for my parents, my brother, and Mansueto. Mansueto won’t tell anyone because he fears Cassio’s reaction, but my parents will. My father is terrified of you. If you talk to him, he’ll keep his silence.”

A dark smile curled his lips. “You want me to threaten your parents?”

“It’s enough if you threaten my father. My mother will do as he says. She’s obedient.”

“A trait you didn’t inherit, obviously.”

I flushed, unsure if it was praise or not. “I do what I think is right.”

Luca stood, towering over me. “Your husband told me he killed Andrea because he was a rat. Now I find out he killed the man who fucked his wife. Cassio lied to me about one of my soldiers. I need to talk to him.”

The ground opened up under me as I realized what it meant. Cassio had lied to his Capo. That could be construed as betrayal.

I stumbled to my feet and staggered toward Luca, grabbing his arm. I didn't care if his expression brought grown men to their knees, if he was one of the most feared men in the States, only rivaled in his cruelness by the monsters in Vegas. Luca wouldn't kill his pregnant cousin, but he might kill the father of an unborn child. "He was broken up over Gaia, out of his mind from pain and anger. He didn't know what he was doing."

Luca's expression didn't change. Maybe my words only made things worse? If Luca thought Cassio acted on impulse, spurred on by his emotions, he might remove him even faster.

Bile traveled up my throat. "Andrea might have been a rat anyway. I don't know."

Luca pulled his arm out of my grip. "I'll talk to Cassio and he'll explain everything to me."

I stared up at him. "You won't kill the father of my unborn baby." It was meant as a question but somehow it came out as a threat, and for a moment I wanted to laugh at the insanity of the situation.

"A man would be dead for threatening me."

"I'm not a man."

Luca took out his phone. "I'm going to call Cassio now and you're returning home with your bodyguard." He pressed the phone to his ear. "Hello, Cassio, I need you to come over." Cassio said something on the other end, and Luca's answering smile made my blood run cold.

He shoved the phone back into his pocket. "Your husband is already here. Your bodyguard called him the second you entered this suite."

"Please," I said hoarsely, tears stinging in my eyes. They didn't move Luca. Compassion wasn't one of his character traits.

A knock sounded and Luca motioned for me to stay where I was. He pulled his gun and headed toward the door. My mind whirled, trying to figure out a way out of this.

"Good evening, Luca," Cassio said calmly.

Luca stepped back and let Cassio pass then closed the door. Cassio scanned me from head to toe then stalked toward me. He pulled me against him, his expression anxious. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I wanted to help and ruined everything."

Cassio searched my eyes before his gaze cut to Luca, who regarded us as if he was trying to decide if we were friend or foe. The change in Cassio's body was immediate. He tensed, and the look in his eyes became

predator-like as they watched one another. He was armed of course. Two guns and at least the same number of knives. Luca didn't take his eyes off Cassio and regarded him in the same way as Cassio did him.

Cassio squeezed my hip gently then kissed my temple. "Let Elia take you home."

Was he serious? I wouldn't leave this suite without him.

"Cassio—"

He nudged me in the direction of the door. I glanced between Luca and him. "Cassio, Luca knows about Gaia and Andrea," I whispered imploringly, trying to get through to him.

Cassio nodded. "I know. Your brother called to warn me about your father's plan."

I froze. "What exactly did he say?"

Cassio stroked my hair gently. "That you're fighting like a lioness to protect Daniele and Simona and me." His mouth pulled into a wistful smile.

I searched his eyes. Did that mean he knew they weren't his kids? I didn't ask from fear of revealing more than Christian had revealed, but his words led to only one conclusion. "I know you didn't want to find out."

Cassio nodded then glanced back at Luca, who was watching closely, the hand with his gun hanging casually at his side. "You need to leave now."

"That she should. We have matters to discuss," Luca said coldly.

Cassio tried to nudge me in the direction of the door again. I stepped back. "I'm not going anywhere without you."

"Giulia, everything will be fine. Let Elia take you home so you can have some rest."

I sidestepped Cassio's tall frame to fix Luca with a stare. "Will everything be fine, Luca?"

Luca's gray eyes remained emotionless pools. "I think you should leave now like your husband said."

"I don't care what you think, and I most definitely won't leave until you swear that my husband will return to me."

Cassio hugged me to him. "Giulia, you will leave now." I didn't miss how he positioned his body between Luca and me as if he worried my disrespect might cause Luca to strike me down.

"No," I snapped and let my legs drop away from under me. Cassio was startled and barely managed to soften my fall. I sank down on the ground

like a stubborn child—or a very heavily pregnant woman determined to save the man she loved. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying right here. You’ll have to drag me out.”

Cassio shook his head but his eyes reflected his admiration. He bent down and picked me up without trouble despite my protests. He carried me toward the door and set me down, his arm slung around my waist so I didn’t try to sit down on the floor again. I clutched at his shirt, wrinkling it. He cupped my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Go home, honey.” His voice was silky and imploring.

Tears blurred my vision as I clung to him. “Swear you’ll return to me.”

Cassio looked back to Luca and for a moment they simply stared at each other. “I swear.” Elia appeared at my side and at a sign from Cassio, he wrapped his arm around me and dragged me away. I looked over my shoulder at Cassio. He gave me an encouraging smile before he closed the door. Had Cassio lied to me about returning home?

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TWENTY-FIVE

Cassio

I closed the door on Giulia’s terrified face before facing Luca, who was still holding his gun. Despite the almost irresistible urge to pull my own, I didn’t. I respected Luca and he appreciated me more than most of his other Underbosses. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t kill me. There wasn’t a man or woman that Luca wasn’t capable of killing, except for his wife and children—maybe.

“You lied about Andrea.”

“I didn’t lie. I omitted part of the truth.”

Luca’s lip curled in a dangerous way. “Some might say omitting part of the truth is lying.”

“The only opinion that matters to me is yours.”

Luca came closer. The gun still hanging down in a relaxed way. The sight might have fooled someone who didn’t know Luca as I did. Luca was a born killer. Few men were as dangerous as him with and without a gun. “If that were true, you would have told me everything when I asked.”

I nodded. “Andrea was my soldier. When I killed him, it was under Philadelphia’s ruling.”

“Philadelphia is mine, Cassio. Everything in the east is mine. You and all my other Underbosses rule over *my* cities in *my* name. Don’t ever forget that.”

“I don’t. But you trust me to rule in Philadelphia as I see fit, and you know I do it well. You don’t expect me to tell you about every incident in

the city. You trust me to deal with them myself."

"I expect you to tell me when there's a traitor in the Famiglia."

"Andrea was a rat."

"Was he? Or was he just the man who fucked your wife?"

With anyone but Luca, I might have attacked. I stifled my fury. "He was both. The Vice President of the chapter of the Tartarus MC in Philadelphia that I dismembered told me they had a contact and the description fit Andrea."

"Did you press a confession out of him?"

"It's what I should have done," I admitted. I held Luca's gaze. "When I came home after attacking the clubhouse, I found my naked, heavily pregnant wife riding my brother-in-law—her half-brother—under my roof with my little son downstairs thinking they were playing some game. When I confronted Andrea, he bragged to me about fucking my wife from the first day of our marriage and that my children weren't mine. I beat him to death with my bare fists, broke every fucking bone in his body, smashed in his cheating face until his eyes popped out, and I would do it again."

Luca nodded because jealous rage was something he understood only too well. "Did you kill Gaia?"

"No. I didn't even consider it," I said. "She killed herself, like I told you. She missed him too much."

The pain of the past didn't come this time. Gaia was the past. Giulia was my present and future. She'd showed me what it meant to love a woman as fiercely as I loved my children.

Luca sheathed his gun. "I expect the truth from my men."

"I didn't want anyone to find out that Gaia had cheated. Some people did, of course, and their reaction was bad enough." I hated admitting this, but Luca needed to understand. I swore to Giulia that I'd return to her, and I had every intention of keeping that promise.

"I understand," Luca said simply. "I'm going to make sure Felix keeps his fucking mouth shut unless you want the truth out."

The truth about Daniele and Simona, about their blood, and why they didn't look like me. "Daniele and Simona are my children in every regard that matters. They can't ever find out the truth."

"They won't." Luca picked up his phone.

"I should handle it."

Luca smiled wryly. “Your wife might not be happy if you kill her father, and Felix might count on it. Felix knows I wouldn’t hesitate to end his sorry life, however.”

I inclined my head. Luca had killed family members before, so Felix definitely couldn’t hope for mercy.

Luca pressed the phone to his ear. “Ahh, Felix, I hear you acquired some interesting tidbit of information. Have you told anyone yet?” Luca waited. “And it’ll stay that way. Understood? I think it would be best to discuss the matter in person, just so I can really get the message across to you.” Pause. “No, you will meet me in New York tomorrow at four p.m. Don’t make me wait.” He hung up.

I nodded my thanks because the actual words would never pass my lips.

“You should go to your wife now.”

I turned around and headed to the door, but before I could open it, Luca spoke up again, “This was your last omission, Cassio. Even three children won’t protect you next time you lie to me.”

“I know.”

I left. Faro still waited in the corridor and almost sagged in relief when he spotted me.

He waited until the elevator doors closed before he said, “I thought I wouldn’t see you again.”

“Luca knows I’m worth more alive than dead.”

Faro shook his head. “If you say so.” He regarded me closely. “Do you want to talk?”

I grimaced. “I don’t need to talk.”

The second I stepped into our house, Giulia stormed toward me and embraced me so tightly I worried she might bruise her bump. Her eyes were red. Daniele stepped into the foyer behind her. At twelve, he was almost as tall as Giulia. I still remembered when he’d clung to my trouser legs.

“Shouldn’t you be in bed? You have school tomorrow.”

“I knew something was wrong when Mom came home crying. She wouldn’t tell me what was going on.” His voice was already changing from

boy to man. I'd raised him, had suspected he wasn't mine for many years and now had certainty. It didn't change anything. Giulia loved Daniele and Simona as if they were her own, and I did too.

"I had a discussion with Luca."

Daniele came closer, fear on his face. "Are you in trouble, Dad?"

That word coming from his lips still filled me with pride. That would never change.

Giulia stepped back to give us room.

I cupped the back of Daniele's head and pulled him against my chest. "I cleared everything up. It was a misunderstanding." Daniele briefly hugged me. Now that he wasn't a small boy anymore, these displays of affection had become less. "Now go to bed."

Daniele pulled back and headed upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. I wrapped an arm around Giulia.

"Nothing changed," she said firmly.

"Nothing changed," I confirmed. "Daniele is a good boy, my boy, and he'll be a good Underboss."

Giulia smiled widely. "I know he will be. Just like his dad." She linked our fingers. "Let's go to bed." The way she said it, I knew she needed more than just sleep, and after today, making love to my wife sounded like the perfect balm.

After Giulia had fallen asleep, I headed into the cigar lounge. Loulou trotted after me. She spent most nights in Daniele's or Simona's bed, but my steps must have drawn her out. Fixing myself a drink, I sank down in the wide armchair and took a sip. It was dark in the room, except for the moonlight streaming in through the windows and the glow of the dying embers in the fireplace.

Loulou peered up at me.

I patted my thigh and she effortlessly jumped up then curled up on my lap. She and I had come to an understanding over the years. She still preferred Giulia, Simona, and Daniele, but when I spent a sleepless night in the lounge, she always kept me company.

I stroked her soft curls with a sigh.

Secrets had a way of coming out. Today had proven that.

I should have known Father had done a paternity test the moment he found out about Andrea. He wasn't a man who let things rest that bothered him.

I was angry for his disregard of my wishes and absolutely livid that he wanted the truth out so badly that he told someone like Felix. Both wanted to see their unborn grandson as an Underboss. That was all it took to turn men who hardly tolerated each other into allies.

I didn't want to imagine what it would have done to Daniele and Simona if they'd found out. Our circles wouldn't have looked kindly upon them. The result of cheating and incest. No matter how brutally I would have reacted to people's gossiping, I doubt I could have convinced my men to accept Daniele as their boss one day.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to face Father again. He'd risked Daniele's and Simona's future. That wasn't something I could forgive. Luca must have called him today because Father had tried to reach me, but I turned my phone to silent mode. I didn't want to talk to him.

As if my thoughts had conjured it, my phone flashed, but it was Mia. That she was awake at this time of the night was already a bad sign. I picked up.

"You have to come to the hospital. Dad's dying. He won't survive the night."

I was silent, caught somewhere between shock and my burning anger.

"Cassio?"

"I'll be there soon." I hung up. Loulou jumped down from my lap, and I hurried upstairs to wake Giulia.

"I'll come with you," Giulia said immediately.

We didn't wake the kids. I didn't want them to see their dying grandfather, especially if he might reveal the truth in his last moments. Elia would watch the house while we were gone.

Giulia slanted me worried glances as I drove us to the hospital. "Are you okay?"

"No."

"You love your father, right?"

I frowned. Right now, my anger was the dominating emotion toward him, but I still loved him. "He was a decent father, better than many men in our world. He had his faults, but so do I."

"Then don't let your anger ruin saying goodbye. What he did was wrong. He's been sick for a long time. That might have influenced his judgment."

"He's been wanting the truth out for years."

“I know. But still, don’t fight with him today. Let him die in peace. Not just for him, but also for you.”

I sighed. Giulia was the forgiving soul. I was more of a vengeful being. I nodded anyway.

Ilaria waited with Mother in the corridor. Both of them were crying and clinging to each other. Mother immediately hurried my way and hugged me tightly. I patted her back. “What happened?”

Mother couldn’t answer. She only shook her head and kept crying.

I raised my eyebrows at Ilaria. “Father insisted on taking calls from Luca and Felix today. You know how he is. He can’t let business rest, even if you’re in charge. After that, he was upset and it led to another small heart attack. His body is too weak.”

I nodded. “He’s talking to Mia now?”

“Yes,” Ilaria said. “He wanted a word with each of us alone.”

The door swung open and Mia stepped out, her face tear-stained. When she spotted me, she looked relieved. “You’re here. Father worried you wouldn’t come.”

“I’m here,” I said simply. Giulia squeezed my hand. I headed into the hospital room, trying to stifle my anger toward Father. The moment I spotted him lying in the bed, looking breakable and like the shadow of the man I’d known all my life, it slipped away. Giulia was right. Today wasn’t about dishing out accusations. It was about saying goodbye. That was one of the things Giulia had taught me: to allow kindness when I could afford it, which wasn’t often.

Father’s eyes followed me as I walked up to him. He looked terrified. I’d never seen him like that. He was a brave man, one of the strongest men I knew. Now he looked like a word from me could break him.

“Father,” I said quietly.

I touched his thin hand resting limply on the covers. His expression softened, and he slowly turned his hand so he could wrap his fingers around mine, squeezing weakly.

“Cassio.” The word was a croaky whisper. I bent over him to hear him better. “I only… only wanted what I thought was the best.”

“I know.” He’d been wrong, but I, too, was guilty of wrong decisions in my past.

“I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”

Forgiveness wasn't my forte. I wasn't sure if I could really give it to my father so shortly after the events, but he didn't have much time left. "I do." It wasn't a lie. I'd eventually forgive him. Not today, but in a few months or years. He closed his eyes briefly and a tear slid out. I'd never seen my father cry. I leaned forward and hugged him carefully. He squeezed my hand again, even weaker than before. "Can you… get…?"

I nodded and asked my sisters and Mother to enter. Father died two hours later surrounded by his family. Giulia had been right. Making peace with Father hadn't just set him free but also me.

"How's our boy?" I asked like I did every evening when I came home. Tonight, I hadn't made it for dinner—a rare occasion. Giulia's due date was in a few days. After Father's funeral and Luca's warning to Felix, things had settled down. Now we could look forward to the future.

"Good," she said softly, touching her belly. "But I'm always hungry, and I have a terrible craving for something sweet."

I nuzzled her ear. "Just like me."

Giulia huffed. "Not that kind of craving. Though I wouldn't mind that either." She gave me a coy smile that went right down to my dick. Lucky for me, Giulia's sexual appetite hadn't diminished one bit during pregnancy. If possible, it had gotten even more insatiable. Daniele and Simona sat beside each other on the sofa, watching one of their favorite YouTube channels on TV. Loulou was curled up beside them.

"Daniele, Simona, you can watch another video after that one. Your mother and I have something to discuss upstairs."

Daniele's face scrunched up, making it clear he detected the lie. He wasn't a child anymore. At least, that meant he and Simona wouldn't disturb us. Wrapping my arm more tightly around Giulia, I led her upstairs.

"You're eager," she said with a small laugh.

"I told you, I crave something sweet, and we both know you're a sweet temptation I can't resist."

Giulia rolled her eyes as she unbuttoned her dress and dropped it on the bedroom floor. "That was corny."

“Kneel on the bed.”

“You realize I have about twenty pounds attached to my front, right?” Despite her words, she did as I asked. It was my favorite position to eat her out and hers too.

She groaned before I even touched her and not in pleasure. “I think we have to cancel sex.”

I helped her back to her feet, and Giulia’s face contorted.

I froze. “The baby?” I asked, my voice calm, even if I didn’t feel it. Everything inside of me twisted and turned.

“Yeah.”

I wrapped an arm around Giulia, steadying her. I was so nervous, for once in my life, my hands weren’t steady. After helping Giulia get dressed, calling Elia, and telling Daniele to take care of Simona, I drove us to the hospital, all the while whispering words of comfort. I wasn’t even sure what exactly I said, hardly noticed the street ahead of us, but I got us there safely.

I’d never been present during a birth. Gaia hadn’t allowed me to witness this moment of a baby being born. I hadn’t insisted because I wanted her and our baby to be safe during labor. I didn’t want her arguing with me.

This time was different. In every regard. Giulia wanted me at her side, needed me. I held her hand through every new wave of pain, felt her body convulse under the force of it, marveled at her strength and her ability to gift me with her beautiful smile whenever she got a respite. Seeing her in agony was the worst thing I could imagine, but I was grateful that she allowed me to witness this.

“One more push,” the doula encouraged after almost five hours of labor.

Giulia clutched my hand, her face scrunching up. She was tired and sweaty. The floor was covered in fluid, my clothes were drenched with sweat and her blood. It was a mess, and yet the most beautiful moment in my life.

And then a cry rang out. I tensed, holding my breath at the same time as Giulia went slack with relief. I stared at Giulia’s red, sweaty face, contorted in pain only moments ago, now filled with a bliss I could hardly comprehend. Her eyes were frozen on the bundle the doula held up, but I could not tear my eyes from my wife, from the woman who’d saved me and my children from a dark path. Giulia slanted me a stunned look and finally, I dragged my gaze away from her to see the little baby that had caused her such bliss.

He was wrinkly and smeared with blood, and it clicked. That bliss on Giulia's face… it crowded my chest, made me feel almost lightheaded with its force. The doula came over to us and put our son in Giulia's arms. Gabriel was beautiful. I wrapped my arm around Giulia's shoulders, kissing her temple, filled with more gratefulness than I ever considered myself capable of. Her smile was pure love, unrestrained joy.

I would have been happy with only two kids, but now that Gabriel lay in Giulia's arms, now that I'd witnessed his birth, I knew this would make our life even more perfect.

Going through labor once was definitely enough, which was why I was entirely grateful that we already had three kids, two of which I didn't have to squeeze out of me. I loved Daniele and Simona with all my heart, and Gabriel joining our little family didn't change it. Still, I was glad that I experienced pregnancy, not so much the actual birth, just once.

The day after I'd given birth, Simona and Daniele visited the hospital with Elia. They both stared down at Gabriel's sleeping form in his crib as if he was an alien.

I stifled a smile. Cassio touched their shoulders. His clothes were wrinkly from spending the night in hospital, and his stubble looked much scruffier than he preferred, but his eyes lit up with pride. "Now you have a little brother to watch over. That means you'll have to stop fighting all the time or it'll upset the baby."

Daniele gave his dad a doubtful expression, looking right through him.

Nice try.

"You said he'd look cute, but he's all wrinkly, and he's shedding skin from his head," Simona said with a wrinkled nose.

Cassio sighed. With a laugh, I got out of bed and slowly made my way over to them despite the pain in my lower body. “He’s a newborn. That’s how they look. I think he’s impossibly cute.”

“Was I a cute baby?” she asked.

“Yes,” Cassio and I said at the same time.

Daniele frowned. I wrapped my arm around him, whispering, “I love you.” He smiled, abandoning whatever dark thoughts had bothered him. “I’m glad you got me a brother and not a sister like Simona wanted.”

“You need to thank your dad for that.”

Cassio narrowed his eyes at me when Simona and Daniele looked at him for answers. Grinning, I walked up to him. “Maybe you need to have the talk about the birds and the bees soon.”

“I talked to Daniele, and Simona doesn’t need to know anything until she’s sixteen or seventeen.”

I rolled my eyes. “I was seventeen when we got engaged.”

“Don’t remind me.” He kissed my lips, causing our children to make disgusted faces.

“It worked out well.”

“It did,” he agreed, peering down at our sleeping newborn son.

In the afternoon, Mom, Dad, and Christian came to visit. I had seen my parents at Mansueto’s funeral, but we had only exchanged public pleasantries. We hadn’t really talked once since our fight. They probably held it against me that I asked Luca to threaten them. That was why I was surprised to see them.

Cassio hovered beside the window, not greeting either of my parents as they stepped in. He shook hands with Christian, however, which made me smile. My brother turned to me then and hugged me awkwardly because I cradled Gabriel in my arms. “Congrats. From Corinna as well. She would have come but she’s feeling sick often.” His wife was pregnant with their third child.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Mom and Dad won’t give you any more trouble. I talked to Dad and made it clear that he needed to get a grip if he didn’t want to lose you and me.”

A wave of gratefulness flooded me. Christian squeezed my shoulder before he stepped back to make room for Mom and Dad.

Mom crept toward me, her eyes filling with tears. “Oh, Giulia.”

Her joy was earnest and it dulled my resentment. This was a new stage in my life, and I didn’t want to be weighed down by baggage from the past. I smiled. She hugged me, careful not to crush Gabriel. She stroked his cheek and took his tiny fingers into her hand. “God, I forgot how small babies are.”

Dad waited a few steps behind her, looking awkward, but his eyes, too, brimmed with emotion. I smiled at him and he stepped forward. “Congratulations.”

“Won’t you hug me?”

Relief crossed his face, and like Mom, he embraced me gently. He didn’t really know what to do with Gabriel, but he caressed his head once before he stepped back.

Cassio’s gaze could have frozen over a furnace. “I hope you heed Luca’s warning.”

“Cassio,” I said softly. “My parents won’t ever mention the matter again. Right?”

I looked at them expectantly. If they loved me, if they wanted me and their grandson in their life, they’d forget what Mansueto had told them.

Dad sighed and nodded. “If it’s your wish, we’ll take the secret to our grave.”

“It is.”

It was settled. We didn’t mention it again, and when Simona and Daniele joined us later, my parents hugged them and treated them almost as if they were their grandkids.

This was proof of how much they feared losing me… and Luca’s wrath, but I focused on the former, not the latter. Life was decidedly more pleasant if you chose to concentrate on the positive and not the negative. And I had so much to be grateful for.

A loving husband, a reasonably well-behaved dog, and three wonderful kids.

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EPILOGUE

Cassio

In the past, I'd visited my family's beach house to find inner peace and remind myself of the beauty in life. I'd gotten up early to stand on the porch and watch the ocean roll over the white beach, to listen to the calming *whooshing* of the water without being disturbed. I often brought work with me.

Today, I slept in. Something Giulia had taught me. It was already past nine when I stepped onto the porch. Giulia and the kids were already up. Laughter drifted up to me from the beach, not the quiet of the past. I didn't miss it. I hadn't come here to find inner peace or see something beautiful. Inner peace had found me when Giulia stepped into my life. I didn't have to drive hundreds of miles to seek a beach house for that. Now I only had to come home to my wife. Too beautiful for words—inside and out.

I closed my eyes, tilting my head up to the early morning sun, letting it warm my upper body and face. Many aspects of my life remained dark spots of brutality, but my home had become my safe haven.

"Love, won't you join us?" Giulia called.

I looked at her. She cradled our two-month-old son with one arm while her other hand clutched her ginormous sunhat against her head. The wind was tearing relentlessly at the ugly thing. I'd made peace with her quirky clothes, but some things were beyond my tolerance.

"Love?"

That word wasn’t a casual endearment born out of habit coming from Giulia’s lips. Every time she said it, it held meaning.

Giulia encompassed that word “love,” *that feeling*, in every action, every smile, every fiber of her being.

I headed down to her, sand clinging to my bare feet as I crossed the dune to the beach. Simona and Daniele were taking a dip in the cold ocean, chasing each other and laughing. It was warm for late October, but the water was freezing cold. Back in Philadelphia these moments of childish carefreeness were few and far between for Daniele. At twelve, almost thirteen, he was only a little over a year away from becoming a Made Man—his fourteenth birthday would mark the day of his induction. His eyes found me briefly, and he gave me a boyish grin before Simona tossed water into his face and their chase continued. I joined Giulia, wrapped an arm around her waist, and grabbed the hand holding her hat down to pull her against my body, Gabriel between us. A gust of wind carried the straw hat away until only the bright yellow of its one big sunflower flashed in the distance.

Giulia gave me an indignant look. “You did that on purpose.”

I kissed her and she softened against me. Giulia handed me Gabriel, who peered up at me with my dark-blue eyes. It filled me with pride seeing our physical similarities, but it wasn’t stronger than the pride I felt when Daniele and Simona did something that I’d taught them—like play pool. Both of them were quite good at it. I loved all three of them equally.

“I have more hats like that,” she said pointedly.

“I know. I’ve made peace with your love of sunflowers.” Giulia had planted several of those ginormous flowers in our garden. What had once been a neatly manicured lawn was now filled with toys (for children and Loulou), wildflowers, and those yellow atrocities. “You brought chaos into my life.”

“You like my kind of chaos.”

Daniele and Simona continued their chase on the beach. Loulou jumped up from her spot on a lounge chair and joined them with cheerful barking. The floor of our beach house would be littered with sand tonight. In the past, this would have made me furious.

“I do. More than anything else, I love our life. It’s perfect in my eyes.”

Giulia kissed my chest over my heart then Gabriel’s forehead. “We made it that way. We work every day so it stays that way. Happiness is a

choice.”

I wasn’t sure it was true for everyone, but for me, especially since Giulia had come into my life, it was. Giulia still painted almost every day and even took courses to improve her craft. In one of them, the teacher had asked them to create a painting that expressed their vision of happiness.

Giulia had painted our children, Loulou, and me taking a stroll on the beach.

It was as easy as that. Whenever I looked at the photo of Giulia and our little family that I carried in my wallet, one overwhelming feeling filled me: happiness.

THE END

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I usually avoid these at all costs because I worry that I'll inevitably forget to mention someone. Yet, I feel like it's time to say my thanks.

My husband always says I'm even worse at expressing emotions than him, which if you knew him (I often refer to him as the iceman), would give you a pretty good idea of just how bad I am at this. Maybe it's because as authors we spend more time in our heads than outside of it because sometimes, I say my thanks so often in my head that I'm convinced I actually voiced them aloud. Expressing deeper emotions is even harder for me, so I usually just don't.

But there are many people who helped me tremendously, not just with this book (that's just a very small part of it), but with my career. Becoming a professional writer can be a lonely endeavor. I love writing and communicating with fans. Everything else, all the organizational effort that goes into being a writer, not so much.

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gratitude for you, because I AM eternally grateful. My books exist because of you. <3

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cora is the author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. She likes her men like her martinis—dirty and strong.

Cora lives in Germany with a cute but crazy Bearded Collie, as well as the cute but crazy man at her side. When she doesn't spend her days dreaming up sexy books, she plans her next travel adventure or cooks too spicy dishes from all over the world.

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